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# A COSTLY HERITAGE

BY

ALICE O'HANLON

AUTHOR OF "HORACE M'LEAN," ETC.

*IN THREE VOLUMES*

VOL. II.



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# A COSTLY HERITAGE.



## CHAPTER I.

CLIVE WILLOUGHBY.

**S**CARCELY had this inquiry concerning her brother left Miss Willoughby's lips before a slight creaking noise became audible. It issued from the other recess—situated on the same side of the room as that wherein the girls had been seated.

“Ah, there he is!” cried Fanny, springing forward to meet Clive, who was in the act of entering by a glass door that opened from the garden.

“Well, Fanny,” Eva heard a cheery young voice exclaim, “how late luncheon

is! I had been preparing for a scolding. I came across a small child wandering about in Howe's turnip field, bleating like a lost lamb, so I was obliged to try to find an owner for it."

"Oh, you needn't apologise to me, my dear; I am not Grannie. Clive, we have a guest for luncheon"—Fanny had placed herself in front of him, so as to intercept his advance—"that is why it is late, perhaps. Guess who it is," she added, lowering her voice.

"Sir Romney Northbrooke, very probably," laughed Clive, mentioning the most unlikely person he could think of.

"No, but you are warm, very warm, as we used to say, when we played at hide-and-seek," rejoined his sister; "guess again."

"Not I. But I am warm enough, that is true, for I've been running. Do stand out of the way, child. Well, Liebchen?"

Liebchen was Clive's pet name for his younger sister, and he had uttered it whilst approaching her. Suddenly, however, he stopped short. By the side of the invalid's couch stood a tall girl, with a graceful figure and a face the most exquisite he had ever seen—a face to dream of—a face more beautiful, he felt sure, than Raphael or Titian had ever painted! For a full minute the young man gazed at this bewildering apparition, his eyes wide open in admiring astonishment; and, it is to be feared, his mouth also. Then, becoming conscious of his unintentional rudeness, and of the fact that Fanny was introducing him to the lovely stranger, he stepped forward, blushing crimson, and touched the hand which Eva had extended towards him. As she withdrew it, Eva also blushed, remembering that she ought only to have bowed. Yet, how could she have treated so coldly the brave hero who had saved

her cousin's life? the noble, unselfish young man who had sacrificed a fortune rather than infringe upon his brother's birthright, or cause the defeat of his expectations. Glancing at him a second time, Eva thought that Mr. Clive Willoughby looked like one from whom noble deeds might be expected; and yet he did not in the slightest degree resemble the conventional hero of romance. For that, he ought certainly to have had dark hair and eyes; whereas Clive, like his younger sister, was fair. He was not, however, like her, pale. In his cheek was the rich colour of perfect health; and even now, in winter, his nose and forehead were not guiltless of freckles. The warmth and glow, moreover, which distinguished his complexion from that of his sick sister seemed likewise to have got into his hair, and to have made a similar difference there. Janey's, poor child, was soft, pale, and very fine; his was auburn, crisp, and given to

---

curling about his forehead, as though with an exuberance of life and strength. Again, his eyes, though identical in hue, were dissimilar in expression. As an old gardener in the Vicar's employ had once remarked, "Master Clive's eyes were for all the world like a bit o' bright blue summer sky, as it makes you smile only just to look up into." Nevertheless, though their usual aspect was riant and happy, one instinctively felt that the young man's eyes were capable of far other expressions; and that, whilst sunny, his nature was not shallow, seemed further to be indicated by the firm, clear-cut chin; and also by the shape of the mouth, which howbeit a little golden-coloured moustache was now doing its best to hide; for the rest, young Willoughby was nearly six feet in height; and his figure, though still slim, as his sister had described it to be a year ago, was gradually filling out into manly proportions. On the whole,

his appearance had certainly not dispelled the favourable impression which had already been produced upon Miss Northbrooke's mind concerning him. As to the impression which Miss Northbrooke had produced upon his mind, it was, at all events startling. Clive had not recovered it; he was still conscious of an accelerated pulse, of a sensation of surprise and bewilderment, as he wheeled his sister's invalid chair towards the dining-room.

A glance at the table having set Fanny's hospitable fears respecting the luncheon to rest, she proceeded with her wonted vivacity to introduce the visitor to "Uncle John." Age is entirely a relative matter—an abstract noun, which changes in signification in accordance with the standpoint from which it is viewed. By an elderly parishioner of eighty, Mr. Dalziel, despite his iron-grey hair, had this morning been designated a "young fellow." To Evelyn

Northbrooke, at eighteen, he appeared quite an old man. His niece, Fanny, too, had spoken of him somewhat irreverently, as "the sweetest old darling." And certainly the one adjective was applicable, however it might be with the other. "Sweet" was exactly the word which best described his face, with its gentle thoughtfulness of expression and its curious listening air, resembling almost that which is common to the faces of the blind. For to many practical purposes Mr. Dalziel was blind. He was so short-sighted that unless it were within an inch of his nose, he could see no object distinctly.

As they shook hands, Eva was beginning to repeat to him her apologies for what she called her "unceremonious intrusion." But the good clergyman interposed with a kindly remonstrance.

"My dear young lady, we don't belong here to the fashionable world," he said,



smiling. "We prefer to be natural and simple in our intercourse with our neighbours. We eschew conventionalities and all that is artificial ; at least, we try to do so, don't we, mother ?"

A profound silence followed upon this terribly *mal-à-propos* remark. Eva, conscious that she was betraying her sense of its personality by a blush, cast a quick glance at the Vicar. Was it possible that he could have meant any reflection ? No ; there was a look of the most perfect innocence on his face, as he continued to smile at his mother ; who, poor lady, had just been repowdering with particular unskilfulness. Clive was the first to break the uncomfortable silence ; and by and by the little *contretemps* was forgotten, and a pleasant chit-chat of conversation was going on round the table. What helped to render it more pleasant was a fact that Evelyn noticed, viz., that the whole family ;

however diverse in other respects, resembled each other in one particular. They had all remarkably sweet and musical voices. Even Grannie was no exception to the rule. Her voice was the most agreeable thing about her, and the youngest. To listen to her with averted eyes, one might almost have believed her to have been the age she vainly endeavoured to make herself appear.

Luncheon over, Mr. Dalziel went out to attend a funeral. His parish was large and scattered, and he was often called upon to marry or to bury people who, by reason of distance, had seldom entered the church.

The rest of the party then retired to the drawing-room; Clive attending, as was his custom, to Janey's transportation. It was a cheerful room; loftier, and with more pretension to elegance of appointment, than any other in the house. A splendid fire

blazed in the grate, and, carefully screening her complexion with a fan, the Hon. Mrs. Dalziel sat near it, graciously entertaining Eva with a description of London society in her youth, and of the balls, and "at homes" she used to attend, and the triumphs her beauty had ensured. But even this enthralling subject was powerless to prevent the poor old lady from becoming sleepy as the moment approached for her usual afternoon siesta. In vain she tried to stifle her yawns or to keep her eyelids from drooping. Nature and custom proved too much for her; and presently, murmuring some excuse about an important letter she had to write, she betook herself to her own room. By Fanny her departure was hailed with open manifestations of delight; by the rest with secret satisfaction; and the four young people now began to make themselves very happy together.

The Vicarage was not rich in extrinsic

resources for amusement, but the present visitor did not appear difficult to amuse. Over some cartoons and engravings of ancient masters, which Clive had brought to show her, she lingered with apparent pleasure. Then, when they were finished, she looked through all the views for the stereoscope—still under the young man's guidance.

And Clive, sitting near her in order to arrange the slides, seemed to have found a new interest in those old representations, for which familiarity had certainly had time to inspire contempt. At all events, he made a very genial showman, and neither Miss Northbrooke nor himself seemed at all relieved when the last slide was inserted. On the contrary, it struck Fanny that they both appeared a little disposed to begin and go through the collection again. To prevent the indulgence of such an unaccountable perversion of fancy, she

hastened to propose that they should now have some music.

“Do you play, Miss Northbrooke?” she inquired, putting the question with some diffidence, as she recollected Evelyn’s former position in life.

“A little,” was the answer. “I am exceedingly fond of music. Papa kindly bought me a harp when we were in Italy, and allowed me to take lessons, which I hope to be able to continue here. But I think that I sing better than I play,” she added.

Thereupon, with the charming grace of a natural, unaffected nature, she went to the piano, and began, after a moment’s consideration, to sing Beethoven’s “Ade-läidé.” Her voice, though it lacked high cultivation, was powerful, thrilling, and in the upper notes sweet and melodious as that of a lark, and she rendered the impassioned song with taste and feeling.

On its conclusion, Fanny and Janey both broke forth together into enthusiastic and delighted applause. But Clive, Eva noticed, said little. Glancing up at him, however, where he stood leaning against the piano, she caught him gazing at her with an expression in his blue eyes to which she was now no stranger. Eyes of many colours had dwelt upon her lovely features during the past year with a similar look of intense admiration. But never before had Eva thrilled and blushed beneath any glance as she found herself doing beneath this. Never before had she experienced such pleasure in being admired, or felt anything like the curious little throb of responsive feeling which caused her heart to flutter so, and which made her feel rather nervous when pressed to sing again. However, she gained confidence when she began, choosing this time "The Shadow Song," from *Dinorah*. Again her perform-

ance called forth rapturous applause from her little audience, expressed principally by Fanny's voice; and when it had subsided somewhat, that young lady took her turn at the piano, and played very nicely an "Impromptu" by Schubert. After that, Clive and Eva tried together a vocal duet, wherein they broke down several times; but in which, finding that their voices suited admirably, they insisted on persevering in the most praiseworthy manner.

At length, abandoning music, but feeling that through the influence of sweet melody and mutual appreciation of art their nascent liking for each other had been strengthened, the other three gathered round poor Janey's chair, and all four young people grew exceedingly merry, laughing and joking together in the delightfully foolish fashion of happy youth.

Even wise, thoughtful little Janey seemed to catch from her companions the infection of

exuberant spirits, and to become, for once, almost as gay and lively as her elder sister. Time passed swiftly, and all were surprised to find it so late when, at five o'clock, afternoon tea was served. With it reappeared Mrs. Dalziel, refreshed by her slumbers, and still inclined to be amiable and garrulous. Her presence, however, checked, as it invariably did, her grandchildren's mirth, and Eva, having drank a cup of tea, declared that she must now return home. Clive and Fanny accompanied her to the Hall, and Eva thought the distance between it and the Vicarage very short. Before she parted with them, her new friends had given her a promise that they would come up on the following day to ride with Alec and herself. Strange to say, Mr. Clive Willoughby and Miss Evelyn Northbrooke both dreamt of each other that night!



## CHAPTER II.

### SIR ROMNEY NORTHBROOKE IN LONDON.

**M**EANTIME, how had it fared with Sir Romney Northbrooke, whilst his daughter had thus, without his knowledge, been making acquaintances—perhaps forming friendships which were to endure and influence her whole future life? and whilst his son, too, had been passing the day in a place and manner very different from that he imagined?

On leaving home in the morning, the baronet had hoped to have caught the express to London. But, to his annoyance, he had reached Narrowtown Station just in time to see the last carriage whirled out of sight. After waiting three-quarters of an *h*!

hour, he had been obliged to take a slow train—and a very slow train it proved. For the first part of the journey it proved also a very full train. Every seat, even in the first-class compartment wherein Sir Romney travelled, was occupied. At Derby, however, where a public excitement of some kind was going forward, most of the people got out, and only an elderly lady remained as his companion. After studying the face of this lady for some moments, the baronet removed the dark spectacles which he invariably wore when out of doors or in the company of strangers. These spectacles, it may here be remarked, neither magnified nor diminished. They were made merely of smoked glass, and were worn as protectives—Sir Romney having, as he had explained to his son and daughter, suffered, whilst in California, from an attack of ophthalmia brought on by the glare of the hot summer sun during the

last year which he had spent at the gold-diggings. So far as his children could perceive, no outward injury had been sustained by the eyes, which, as it has already been remarked, were very beautiful. Still, any strong light, whether natural or artificial, was apt to cause him pain, and Sir Romney was seldom seen without his preservatives. This morning, however, his sight must either have been unusually strong, or absorption of mind had made him oblivious of physical inconvenience, for, notwithstanding that the sun was shining with remarkable brilliancy for the time of year, the baronet continued to gaze steadfastly through the carriage window without so much as the quiver of an eyelid to show that he was suffering. Mental disquietude, howbeit, was evidenced by the stern set of his mouth and the sharp contraction of his brow, and every now and then Sir Romney moved uneasily in his seat. By consequence

of these repeated movements, a handsome tiger skin railway rug, wherein he had enveloped his knees, gradually became loosened, and by and by it slipped suddenly to the ground. Startled out of his reverie, Sir Romney turned from the window, and, whilst re-adjusting his rug, cast a glance at his companion, who sat at the opposite end of the carriage. The elderly lady was absorbed in a newspaper. Sir Romney, moved, perhaps, by the force of example, took up a copy of the *Times*, with which he had provided himself, and opened to the leading article. But he had not read many moments before he let the paper drop upon his knee, and, taking out his pocket-book, drew from it one of the two missives he had that morning received. It was that which had occasioned his present journey. The envelope contained a letter and an enclosure, both of which he proceeded to peruse and reperuse so often that he might

almost have been trying to learn their contents by heart. In order that the reader may understand, so far as these letters will enable him to do, the nature of the "business" which was taking Sir Romney to London, we will here transcribe them.

The first—the handwriting whereof corresponded with that of the address upon the envelope—was signed by an obscure London attorney, in practice at the East-end of the city. It ran as follows:—

"To Sir Romney Northbrooke, Bart.—  
Most Honoured Sir.—I am happy to inform you that success has, at last, rewarded our efforts. The lady's present address has been discovered, as you will see from the enclosed letter; likewise some particulars regarding her which I hope may give satisfaction. Your name has not, of course, been mentioned in the transaction, as the said enclosure will prove. If you will

forward the handsome honorarium which you empowered me to offer in engaging the assistance of the detective force, I will hand it in at Scotland Yard. In a few days you shall have my bill, as you desired me to send it in directly the matter was brought to a successful issue. Of my own secrecy I need not, I hope, again assure you. A lawyer's lips are always closed in respect to the affairs of his clients.

“Yours always to command,

“STEPHEN GREEN.”

The second letter was dated from Scotland Yard, and addressed to Mr. Stephen Green :—

“Dear Sir,—We are now able to put you in possession of the information you desire on behalf of your client. Miss Heathcote, on leaving the house of her aunt, Mrs. John Heathcote, of Belgrave Terrace, Bath, on June 6th, 18—, went to Dublin. There, for two years, she lived in

the family of Lady Caroline Toole as governess. Thence, on the 10th July, 18—, she went to Belfast, again in the capacity of governess to the children of Colonel Piggot. In that post she remained another two years, quitting it on the 20th of September, 18—, to become companion to a Mrs. Grandison, of Leeds, with whom she went abroad, not, however, as you appear to have been misinformed, to travel upon the Continent, but to reside in Madeira. On the 2nd of last August, Mrs. Grandison died at Madeira, and shortly afterwards Miss Heathcote returned to England. She is at present living in London with Lady Henderson, the wife of a wealthy brewer, knight and M.P., as governess to her two little girls. Lady Henderson's address is No. 2,—— Square, Bayswater. As you have satisfied us respecting your client's motives in instituting these inquiries, he need be under no

apprehension of the fact of our having been employed in making them ever getting beyond our office. We are often engaged in making secret researches of a similar nature.

“Yours respectfully,

“JOHN BATTIE, Superintendent.”

Having read and studied these documents, as we have said, for a considerable time, Sir Romney at length replaced them in his pocket-book, besides the letter which he had received from his sister, Lady St. Aubyn. Then, taking up his newspaper again, he seemed to make an effort to get through the leading article. But in vain. Before it was finished he crumpled the paper restlessly in his hand, and, turning to the window, fell once more into deep and abstracted thought.

At Rugby his companion got out, and for the rest of the journey Sir Romney had the carriage to himself. Arrived at Euston Station he took a cab and drove to a



hotel. It was only half-past five when he reached it, but he had eaten nothing since ten o'clock, and the baronet ordered dinner to be served for himself at once in a private room. When it came, however, he could eat little. But he lingered over it as though reluctant to finish. And when eventually the table was cleared of all but the dessert, he began to pace the room to and fro, stopping constantly either to consult his watch or to subject his face to an earnest scrutiny in one or other of the several mirrors which embellished the apartment. Being entirely alone, Sir Romney did not take the trouble to exercise his wonted command of feature and manner. In his countenance nervous uneasiness was very plainly expressed, whilst in his intermittent walk and irregular step, hesitation and irresolution seemed to betray themselves. At length, however, after having stood for some quarter of an hour perfectly

motionless upon the hearthrug, he suddenly drew himself up, walked with an aspect of determination to the bell, and rang it.

"A cab, directly," he ordered, when the waiter appeared.

Five minutes later, entering the vehicle procured for him, he gave the order to drive to No. 2, —— Square, Bayswater. It was rather a long drive, and whilst still at some little distance from his destination, Sir Romney saw, by the clock of a church that he passed, that it wanted only a quarter to eight.

"A curious time to be calling anywhere," he muttered to himself. "But for her it will perhaps not be an inconvenient one; governesses, as a rule, don't dine late."

"Beg pardon, sir. No, sir, my lady is not at home," averred the stately footman, who, owing to the rattle of a carriage which happened to be passing at the moment, had not caught Sir Romney's

question correctly. "She hev' dined early, and hev' just gone off to the theatre, sir, with the two young ladies. And Sir John, he is to meet——"

"I did not ask you for 'your lady,' my good fellow," interposed Sir Romney, impatiently, "nor yet for the worthy knight. I asked if Miss Heathcote was at home."

"Oh, the governess?" rejoined the man, with marked alteration of tone. "Yes, *she's* in. Charles, a gentleman for Miss Heathcote. Show him upstairs."

Thereupon, a subordinate functionary, who had not attained, like the previous speaker, to the dignity of powdered hair, invited Sir Romney to follow him; and, leading the way up a broad flight of stone stairs and across a wide corridor, hung over every inch of wall with pictures in massive gilt frames, he turned into a second passage, and, pausing midway, inquired, in the act of tapping at a door :

“What name shall I say, sir?”

“Mr. Brooke,” was the answer; and that answer was heard by another individual than the footman to whom it was addressed. The individual in question was Miss Eliza Hemming, Lady Henderson’s maid—a young woman with sloe-black eyes, who might have been good-looking but for the extreme sharpness of her nose, and the fact that she had no lips to speak of.

On the point of emerging from her own chamber, the door of which opened directly opposite that of the schoolroom, Miss Hemming had drawn back, hearing footsteps, and was now peering through the crevice she had left herself at the governess’s visitor.

“Mr. Brooke,” announced the footman, throwing open the schoolroom door.

Miss Heathcote rose from a low chair, where she had been reading by the fire,

and turned to the gentleman. From her post of observation, the lady's-maid saw her bow, with a look of surprise on her face, but no sign of recognition.

"So he's a stranger to her!" thought Miss Hemming. "What on earth can a strange gentleman, and such a distinguished-looking one, too, want with the governess? And at this time of day!"

Miss Hemming was blest with an inquiring mind, and no sooner had Charles's white-stockinged calves disappeared round the corner than, laudably bent upon acquiring information, she stepped lightly across the passage and applied her eye to the keyhole opposite. Her thirst for knowledge was to be rewarded in a more interesting manner than she had anticipated.

Miss Heathcote and her visitor were now standing opposite to one another upon the hearthrug. The latter had removed a

pair of dark spectacles he had worn ; the former was gazing at him in speechless eagerness. In another moment the governess, springing forward with a wild cry of joy, had thrown her arms round Mr. Brooke's neck, and was being strained by that gentleman to his breast. Quick as thought, Miss Hemming's eye abdicated its post in favour of her ear.

"Oh ! my darling, is it really—really you ?" she heard Miss Heathcote falter brokenly. Then there was a sob.

"Hush, hush, Emily. Don't cry, dear," implored Mr. Brooke, soothingly.

The lady's-maid pressed her apologies for lips so closely together that they ceased to have any perceptible existence, whilst mentally she repeated her favourite ejaculations—"Well, I never ! What next, I wonder ?"

Miss Heathcote continued to sob—"I can't help it. I am crying for joy. It is

because I am so glad. Oh, Carleton, how miserably unhappy I have been about you! I thought—I thought you must be dead.”

Carleton! That’s his name, then, Carleton Brooke,” meditated Eliza. “A fine name, and a handsome man he is. ’Spose he’s her sweetheart—stuck up thing!”

“And I, too, have been most unhappy about you, Emily,” protested Mr. Brooke. “For a year after we parted, I acknowledge that I did not write; but after that I sent letter upon letter, addressed to you at the house of that wretched woman, Mrs. John Heathcote. I wondered why you didn’t answer; but, at length, I received all my own letters back, with a curt line from Mrs. John, declaring that you had left her house, and that she neither knew nor *wished* to know your present address. I suppose, Emily, you must have quarrelled with her? I don’t wonder at it!”

“Yes; after poor Uncle’s death she

treated me shamefully. But never mind—she is dead now—we won't speak of her. Oh, Carleton, how lonely I have felt! Without a friend or relation in the world, and not even knowing whether or not you were alive! But now—— Oh, my love, how rejoiced, how thankful I am!”

Again the governess embraced Mr. Brooke with a warmth which elicited righteous indignation from the observer. “Well, I never! Bold, impudent thing! Positively if she ain't a disgrace to her sex,” commented Miss Hemmings, with an interior groan.

“Now, dearest, let me have a good look at you. I can scarcely believe yet that it is really you,” pursued Miss Heathcote, standing back to gaze at her visitor. “Think, dear, it is nearly eight years since we parted! Ha, you are well dressed! Carleton, are you well off?”

“Yes, I have made money,” was the



somewhat hesitating answer. "In fact, I am very rich."

"Oh, I am so glad of it. But, Carleton, you are changed very much. What is it? There is something so different about you. Why, it is your *hair*. How very curious? Carleton, your hair has gone quite a different colour."

"Nonsense, Emily!" Mr. Brooke's tone sounded flurried and impatient. "Don't you want to know when I returned from America, and how I found you out?"

"Oh, yes! do tell me. But I thought you had only just come home?"

*Home!* do you call it? Well, I never thought to call England home again. How I *have* hated it! But, no matter. It is fifteen months since I came back, Emily; and for most of that time I have been travelling on the Continent, trying everywhere to find you."

"To find me?"

“Yes! I was told that you had gone abroad with a Mrs. Grandison as travelling companion. It was only this morning that I learned you had been in Madeira. My poor Emily, how you have been tossed about the world! But it has not been my fault, dear. Until lately, I have been myself in the most abject poverty. I could have done nothing for you had I returned earlier. Now, however, your life of servitude shall end. Tell me, have you been happy here?”

Miss Heathcote smiled.

“Not particularly so,” she replied. “Sir John is a vulgar, coarse man; and Lady Henderson is a vulgar, ill-tempered woman. Then, the children are spoiled with over-indulgence; and one of the servants—the lady’s maid—is particularly obnoxious. She annoyed me at first by her familiarity, and I was obliged to show her that I did not look upon her in the

light of an equal, or rather of a superior, as she evidently considers herself. And now she hates me, and shows her spite in every way she can. But it is not worth while to talk about such a trivial matter to you. Besides, I care for nothing, now that I know you are alive—now that I see you again! Oh, my darling! let me have another kiss!”

“A kiss, indeed! Oh, yes! wouldn’t I like to kiss you, just! And so I am obnoxious, am I? And not your equal, eh? And it’s a trivial matter, is it? And Sir John is a vulgar, coarse man; and my lady a vulgar, ill-tempered woman? Ha! ha! we’ll see about that, Miss! *We’ll see!*” The amiable Eliza nodded her head in expressive accompaniment of these thoughts, whilst her thin nostrils quivered in a vain attempt to expand themselves.

That kiss lasted a long time. Miss Hemming’s eye witnessed the end of it, and

then it became the turn for her ear. The governess was speaking again.

“There, let us sit down. And now, Carleton, tell me all about yourself. But, first, explain, please, why you gave the name of *Brooke*? How strange of you, dear, to call yourself by a wrong name!”

“A wrong name?” The black eyes of the lady’s-maid dilated with eager curiosity. She bent forward to listen more attentively. But, alas! in so doing the hand by which she had been supporting herself against the frame slipped, and she fell heavily against the door.

After such a mischance there was no possibility of further listening, but an urgent necessity to escape detection. An exclamation in Mr. Brooke’s voice reached her ear, and a movement within the room. Miss Hemming, however, was fleet and silent of foot. Like a flash of lightning she was out of the passage and slipping

down a back staircase. On the steps leading to the area she sank breathless and panting with hurry and agitation. Presently, having recovered herself, she proceeded downwards and passed into the servants' hall. Some six or seven domestics were assembled there, one of whom was occupied in laying the cloth for their common supper, whilst the rest were gathered round the fire. Upon her entrance the hubbub of conversation ceased, and an elderly woman, who occupied a seat of honour by the hearth, addressed her in somewhat resentful tones :

“Humph ! so you *have* condescended to happear at last, Miss Hemming, have you ? I did think now as you'd ha' come down before and had a drop o' mulled ale, or something comfortable, and a chat, seeing as how my lady was habsent. But I suppose you prefers to keep yourself to yourself, as the saying is ?”

"No, cook, that motter don't apply to me!" returned the lady's maid, with an air of deep gravity. "I have a social disposition, as you didn't ought to need informing; and to come down was just what I had proposed to myself to do, having finished trimming of a bonnet, as I'd thought best to fix the feathers on in my own chamber. But I have been detained. The extraordinariest thing, ladies and gentlemen, as ever you heard tell of has 'appened above stairs this identical evening."

Exclamations of "Lor! you don't say so?" "My gracious!" "Do tell, now!" encouraged Miss Hemming to commence the narrative she was burning to relate.

"Well, then, Mr. Charles may, perhaps, have mentioned that Miss Heathcote—that precious governess of ours—have got a visitor?" she inquired, concentrated scorn in her voice and a vicious sparkle in her eyes.

“Ay, I b’lieve I did happen haccidentally to allude to the fact,” observed the young footman.

“Very well. Now, I take you, Charles Dawson, to witness that that man as you showed up to Miss Heathcote giv’ himself the name of Brooke; and I tell you all that his name is no more Brooke than mine is; or yours, cook; or yours, Lucy Benson.”

“Well, I’m sure! And what is it, then?” demanded cook.

“Nay! that’s more than I can tell, cook, my dear. The Lord above only knows!” rejoined Miss Hemming, piously. “But it’s not *Brooke*, and to call himself sich is forgery and imposture. And the governess and him is sweet on one another, and I make no doubt in my own mind that *her* name is no more Heathcote than his is Brooke. The pair of them, I’m ready to swear, is no better than they should be.

"There's few of us is that, Miss Lizzie," put in Charles.

"None of your insinivations, if *you* please, sir!" retorted the maid. "And I havn't giv' you permission, so far as I recollect, to use familiarities with my name; which is Eliza Hemming, and rightfully my own."

"And, d'ye say, Hemming, as the gent is her sweetheart?" asked one of the young women, a good-looking housemaid.

"Well, Catherine, he may be her sweetheart, or he may not," responded Miss Hemming, assuming a highly virtuous aspect; but all I can say is that a scene of such cuddling and kissing as has took place in that there schoolroom this evening it wouldn't become a proper-minded person to speak of. Afore I'd conduct myself with such-like effrontery as that impident huzzy, I'd—I'd prefer to be execooted!"

"Hem! I'm afreed, Miss Eliza, as you've



been a-listenin' and a-spyin', which is a thing as I'd be sorry to hint at in connection with a well-behaved lady like yourself—hon'ly, it don't seem likely, you know, as you was invited in to superintend all that there kissin' and cuddlin'—which, by the way, it makes a feller's mouth water to think of."

"Well, I never! Fie, for shame, Charles Dawson! And if I *did* listen, it was in the interests of the 'ouse. I've long had my suspicions as that governess wasn't a proper person, and I felt it my dooty to find out the truth. And the truth I *have* found out, which is that she's a disgrace to her sex, and oughtn't to be let stay in a respectable, let alone a Christian family."

"There now, for one female to set on a fellow female like that, I calls it too bad!" observed Charles, who appeared bent upon provoking and contradicting the fair Eliza. "Miss Heathcote's as nice a young lady as

ever stept, if you ax *my* opinion on the matter. And if she *have* got a handsome swell for her sweetheart, there's no call for you to be jealous, my dear."

"Me! Jealous? Oh, the imperence of you!"

"Never mind him, Miss Hemming. Be quiet, Dawson," expostulated cook. "Now tell us, do you think she's going to marry him, then? It's queer the gentleman has not been here afore. But, perhaps, they've wrote reg'ler, if they're engaged."

"I don't know whether they're engaged, or married, or divorced, or what," snapped Eliza. "But they can't have wrote—for it came out that she hadn't seen him of *eight* years, and that they hadn't even known where each other was. Yet she called him 'darling' fit to sicken any one; and he confessed, if you'll believe me, as he'd been follering her about all over the continent for above a year."

“And I don’t wonder at it,” protested Dawson, still intent upon aggravation. “Any feller might be proud of follering about such a sweet young lady as her. And, by Jupiter, I’d ha’ giv’ something to have stood in that cove’s shoes to-night, on account of the kissin’, that I would.”

If a glance of withering scorn and hot fury could have annihilated him, Mr. Charles Dawson’s life would not have been worth a moment’s purchase.

But Miss Hemming did not deign to address him. “Cook,” she resumed, turning her back pointedly upon the young man, “I tell you that Miss Heathcote’s a right bad ’un. And as to being a conceited upstart, it’s beyond anything. If you could only have heard what she said about you and me and everyone of us—talking as though we was dirt under her feet, and worse! And my lady she called a vulgar, ill-natured woman, with a snub nose and

not a ha'porth of brains; and as to master, why the things she said about him—oh, they was shameful! But they shall know everything. It'll be only my duty to let 'em know what a viper they're 'arbouring in the 'ouse, and giving the care to of them innocent children."

"Well, I must say as I never see a finer hexhibition of spite nor this 'ere," remarked the irrepressible Charles. "And you're agoin' to confess then, my dear, as you're addicted to spyin' and pryin' at keyholes, eh? What d'ye think Sir John and my lady 'll say to that way o' gatherin' hinformation?"

"I did it for the good of the 'ouse and for the sake of all our characters," protested the virtuous Eliza;" and I won't be so spoke to, Charles Dawson. You're a nice feller, you are!"

"Yes, my dear, I know you think so; and I'm sorry as I havn't been able to

reciprocate your feelins' more fully. But the fact is, that afore you came here I'd my eye on another party, and my natur's not fickle."

"There! I'll not stay another minit—not another instant—to be so insulted!" cried Miss Hemming, springing to her feet. "No, cook, I don't want no supper, and I havn't told you *half* of what I was going to. But I won't stay. No, I won't! I won't!" And, keeping down her choking sobs, the estimable young woman flew upstairs to the attic, where she threw herself on the floor in a fit of passionate rage. When she was gone, her fellow-servants all agreed that she was a disagreeable, spiteful thing, and that her departure was a "good riddance." Nevertheless, each secretly wished to have heard the other half of those revelations she had been about to make. And certainly what she had already told had excited universal curiosity respecting Miss Heath-


cote's "sweetheart." One by one, the servants—men and women alike—found excuses for slipping upstairs and lingering about the hall in the hope of seeing Mr. Brooke depart. And as Mr. Brooke delayed his departure half-hour after half-hour the curiosity rose to a high pitch. At length, at ten minutes to eleven, the schoolroom door was heard to unclose, and Miss Heathcote came down to the hall with her visitor. On the staircase she encountered a housemaid. As she passed the dining-room door the butler chanced to emerge. In the hall the two footmen were busy dusting statues and pictures, whilst, at the top of the area steps, a group of women jostled one another in their efforts to secure a peep. By each and all of these spectators Miss Heathcote was observed to look deadly pale, and was seen to tremble visibly and to cling to the bannisters as though for

support in descending the stairs. If that distinguished-looking gentleman (they all agreed that he was distinguished-looking) were really her sweetheart, it was queer (so they afterwards remarked to each other) that she should have had such a strange, wild, terrified look on her face. And the parting was certainly not, in the opinion of any of them, very lover-like. Miss Heath, cote, whilst shaking hands with him—merely remarked, “Then, I shall see you again?”

Mr. Brooke briefly responded, “Yes, to-morrow.”

## CHAPTER III.

### A PLEASANT RIDE.

N his return from Sandyford, Alec Northbrooke told his sister that he had made it "all right" with Jessie Bennett. The impression, however, which he conveyed, and had intended to convey, to her mind by these words was by no means a correct one. Like all people of feeble wills and yielding, dependent dispositions, Alec was a moral coward. His natural amiability of feeling made him dislike to witness suffering, and his love of approbation (one of the strongest qualities of his mind) made him shrink especially from placing himself in the unenviable position of an inflictor of pain. In resolv-



ing to go to Sandyford and break off his engagement in person he had not reckoned with these negative forces of his character ; nor had he properly understood or taken into account another peculiarity of his temperament. The affection which he had formerly entertained for Jessie had been as deep as his shallow nature would permit. Absence, howbeit, had cooled and weakened the ardour of it, for, to ensure their permanency, all Alec's impressions needed to be constantly renewed. But, at first sight of the girl's pretty rosy face, his liking for her had revived, and he had felt that to speak the words which he had gone to Sandyford on purpose to speak would be beyond the power of his resolution. Had it not been for Jessie herself, therefore, the question of any breach of the engagement would in all probability not even have been hinted at. But, simple and childish though she was, the young teacher had proved

herself capable of an act of heroism whereto the lover, whom, in her ignorant infatuation, she regarded as the embodiment of all that was noble, could never have risen. Loving him with an affection ten times stronger than his own, she had, nevertheless, voluntarily proffered him his release, and had urged and insisted upon him accepting it. In former days, when practically his position in life had been no better than her own, Jessie had looked upon Alec as infinitely superior to herself. But now, on perceiving the alteration which the fourteen months' absence had wrought in his appearance, she had felt utterly abashed at her own audacity in supposing for a moment that he could remain faithful to her. Alec's eye-glass (brought into frequent requisition), his gold-headed cane, his stylish dress, his fashionable lisp and elegant manners, had altogether conspired to fill the poor girl

with the most unqualified wonder and admiration.

But they had, also, at the same time combined to quench the hopes which, through the gradual coolness she had observed in Alec's letters, had already begun to fail. And, to complete the crushing impression produced by his aspect and carriage, Alec had shown her two or three sketches of Brooke Hall, taken from various points of view, which he had brought, as he said, to give her some idea of his new home. The sketches, which Alec had found in an escritoire in his own room, had been executed by the late Sir Clement's eldest son, and they conveyed a very correct notion of the building.

Through means of these sketches Jessie had been enabled for the first time fully to realise the extent of the change which had taken place in Alec's social status. In all her life passed in Sandyford, with its small

two-storied lodging-houses, or amidst the fishermen's huts of a neighbouring village, Jessie had never beheld or dreamt of such a place as this. Struck with awe, she had gazed at the pictures in silence until she could no longer see them through her tears; thinking of the stories of Cinderella and the Prince, and of King Cophetua and the beggar-maid, wherewith in recreative moments she was wont to delight a juvenile audience at the school, and feeling that the condescension of both Prince and King would be entirely thrown into the shade by that of the glorious Young Apollo, who lived in this magnificent palace, were he to stoop to a union with herself.

“ Oh ! Alec, you must never, never think of me again ! ” she had exclaimed at length, in a broken voice, and with cheeks from which all the roses had vanished. “ You must marry a duchess or a countess— (poor Jessie's notions as to degrees of rank

were extremely misty)—no one else would be fit for you. And, oh! you must never, never think again of me!”

“I shall *always* think of you, Jessie, and I shall never marry anyone else than you!” Alec had impulsively rejoined, flattered by the simple girl’s humility, touched by her tears, and carried away by the tenderness of re-awakened feeling.

And in this asseveration he had persisted, repeating it with increasing emphasis so long as Jessie had persevered in her sorrowful protest against a continuance of the engagement. When, however, by dint of his fervent declarations of love and faithfulness he had at length succeeded in drying her tears and calling back a happy light to her eye, Alec’s sentiments had experienced a chill. He had begun to reflect that, instead of getting out of his scrape, he had only got himself more deeply into it. The recollection of his

father had recurred to him, and he had inwardly shuddered at the thought of the scornful displeasure with which he felt sure Sir Romney would treat the news of his engagement, should it ever come to his knowledge. But worse still than this, the young man had been seized by an uncomfortable prevision that absence from his inamorata would again have the effect, as before, of damping his passion for her, and of re-awakening his ambition for a higher and more suitable match.

Accordingly, when once more poor Jessie, — sensitively alive to this change in his mood, though he had given no verbal expression of it — had reiterated her formula, that he “must never, never think of her again,” he had—although still vowing that he should for ever remain faithful to her—suggested that all correspondence between them should cease for a time. Above all things had he enjoined upon

Jessie that she must never, upon any consideration, again address him at the Hall. He would see her again before long, he had promised, and he would try and make some arrangement for regular communication. Meanwhile, she must love him and trust him, and keep the fact of their being pledged to each other an entire secret.

This, then, was the way in which Alec had made it "all right" with Jessie Bennett. But it was not exactly what Eva understood by the expression when her brother repeated it to her, as they were seated together alone that same evening, after his return from his visit. She took it for granted, as he meant her to do, that the affair was now entirely at an end; and she felt glad of it, not because she either disliked Jessie, or looked down upon her in any way, but because she felt convinced that Alec ought, for his own sake, to choose a woman of larger brain and

stronger will as a wife ; one whose influence might stimulate him to exertion and self-improvement ; not one who, like poor Jessie, would foster his vanity and self-love and all his weaker qualities by amiable but indiscriminating adoration. Not caring, however, to talk upon the subject, she contented herself with hoping that Jessie had not appeared to be greatly distressed by his errand ; and on Alec assuring her that Jessie herself had been the first to broach the matter, and to offer him his freedom, she turned the conversation by a question respecting Mr. Uhland.

For, as a matter of course, Alec had called upon his stepfather, whom he reported to be looking well and cheerful, and concerning whom he had grounds for suspicion that he was contemplating a second marriage. In addition to the provision dealer, Alec had likewise seen Mr. and Mrs. Lilly, and several other old



acquaintances, all of whom he had succeeded in dazzling by his elegant "get up" and lofty airs, and in duly impressing with his eyeglass and his sketches of the Hall. On the whole, what with the palpable flattery of Jessie's humble renunciation of his promise, and the gratifying attention and homage he had received upon every hand, Alec's visit to Sandyford had proved an agreeable one. The only person who, Mordecai-like, had refused to do him honour, had been Mr. Pratt, the curate.

On his way back to the station, Alec had encountered that gentleman in the street; and, although he had stopped to speak to him, and had seen distinctly that he was recognised, Mr. Pratt had passed him with his nose in the air, and without deigning to make any response to his salutation. So puzzled had Alec felt at this extraordinary conduct on the curate's part, that, as he had acknowledged to his sister, he had

been able to think of nothing else during the greater part of the homeward journey. At length, however, he had decided that the only possible solution to the mystery must be that Mr. Pratt had been actuated by ill-feeling begotten of excessive envy.

This conclusion Eva allowed to pass unquestioned, although it, and the fact it concerned, called an amused smile to her face; and, Alec having now exhausted his budget of news, she proceeded, in her turn, to relate her adventures of the day, and to tell him about the new acquaintances she had made.

To two of these acquaintances she had an opportunity, on the following afternoon, of introducing her brother. According to promise, Fanny and Clive Willoughby came up after luncheon to ride with them. And a very delightful ride it proved to a couple, at all events, of the little party. The weather, like that of the previous day, was

bright and exhilarating, though cold, and the road chosen for the ride led through charming and romantic scenery.

For some time the four equestrians (they had taken no grooms in attendance) kept closely together. But, by and by, on turning into one of the narrow lanes with which the district abounded, Alec and Fanny got considerably in advance, whilst Clive lingered behind with Eva, who was a somewhat timid horsewoman. Conversing together, the two fell by degrees into a walk; and that walk they continued, despite the coldness of the air, which they did not appear to feel, and the occasional chafing of their horses, who evidently preferred more active exercise, until their companions met them, returning, with glowing cheeks, from a canter of several miles ahead.

On being rallied by Fanny upon their laziness, both coloured, though Clive proved

ready with some laughing retort apropos of his sister's superfluous energy. And certainly, if Eva and he had been lazy in one way, they had not been so in another. If they had not got through very much riding, they had unquestionably got through a great deal of talking. Considering, indeed, that they were still comparative strangers, it was marvellous how much they had found to say to each other; and seeing that all the topics upon which they had touched had been of the most general and common-place nature, it was, perhaps, even more marvellous that the conversation should have seemed to both so exceedingly interesting. But that they should have looked at each other a good deal during the course of that conversation was, of course, not at all marvellous. For, as everybody knows, common courtesy demands that one should turn towards the person one addresses; and

neither Miss Northbrooke nor Mr. Willoughby would willingly have been guilty of a breach of politeness.

As a matter of simple necessity, therefore, Eva throughout that ride, which, on account of the fineness of the weather, had proved so agreeable, had very frequently met Clive's blue eyes looking into her own. And they were such particularly blue eyes, and such bright eyes, and such frank and kindly eyes, that after she got home they seemed somehow to linger pleasantly in her memory with a curious kind of haunting sensation. As she stood before the mirror in her own room, still in her riding hat and habit, she could have fancied that they were even yet fixed upon her face; and the feeling was so strong that she actually glanced round the apartment as though to assure herself that she was alone. Then for a little while Miss Northbrooke gave herself

up to what was for her an entirely novel occupation. She gazed eagerly, and it must be acknowledged admiringly, at her own face in the glass. She scrutinized each feature separately, even parting her pretty lips to look at the regular set of small white teeth they concealed. Then smiling, as if well pleased at the result, she took up a hand-glass and studied her profile, first on one side and then on the other, closing her eyes as nearly as possible in order to estimate the length of the long up-curling lashes which shaded them. In short, this usually sensible and dignified young woman behaved, for once, like the vainest and veriest little coquette in Christendom. What was the meaning of this new interest in her own appearance, and of the unwonted feeling of pride and delight in her unquestionable loveliness wherewith the critical examination of her almost perfect features now inspired her?

Had she thought of analyzing the matter, Eva would probably not have been able to explain it very satisfactorily even to herself. But she blushed with a sudden sense of confusion when caught still surveying herself through the hand-glass by her maid, who, after having waited in vain for the summons of the bell, had come to offer her assistance in removing her young mistress's habit.

It was too early as yet to dress for dinner, and, having slipped on the costume which she had worn in the morning, Eva again found herself alone. Before her return from her ride the twilight had been shut out from her dressing and bed rooms, and the lamps lighted. A magnificent fire, too, of cannel coal blazed in the grate of the latter apartment, which altogether looked so exceedingly comfortable that she felt disinclined to leave it. Seating herself accordingly in an easy chair, on the soft

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lamb-skin hearth rug, Eva fell forthwith into a meditation, or rather into a very improving exercise of memory, which consisted in going over and over again in her mind each word that Mr. Clive Willoughby had spoken to her this afternoon, and also in recalling every look and expression that had accompanied those words.



## CHAPTER IV.

### UNINVITED GUESTS.

**W**HEN usefully and agreeably employed, time, as all the world knows, passes on swift pinions; and Miss Northbrooke had been occupied considerably longer than she imagined in testing the strength of her retentive faculties, when her attention was at length distracted by a sound. It was that of carriage-wheels crunching the gravel drive beneath the windows of her room, which was situated at the front of the house, and almost immediately above the principal entrance. Glancing at an ormolu timepiece on the mantleshef, she perceived that it was half-past six. That, then, must be the carriage returning from

the station with her father. It had been sent to meet a train getting into Narrowtown at 5.25, by which train (an express from London) Sir Romney had given notice yesterday of his intention to travel home. To drive from Narrowtown Station took only three-quarters of an hour, so that had the train been punctual the baronet should have reached the Hall nearly twenty minutes ago.

"I ought to run down and welcome him home," thought Eva to herself. Yet she sat still, deferring, as we are all so apt to do, the performance of a duty which did not present itself exactly in the guise of a pleasure. At the end of a few minutes, however, she sprang up, and was in the act of replacing a firescreen, which she had taken from the chimneypiece, when there came a tap to her door. "Entrez," she called out, imagining the applicant to be the Parisian maid, who had been

engaged at the outset of their travels abroad, and to whose unaccustomed services Eva was only now beginning, in some degree, to reconcile herself. It was not, however, the maid who presented herself on thus receiving permission to enter, but her brother. With his shoulders elevated, and the palms of his hands outspread, Alec stepped forward, imitating a gesture of comic dismay which he had learned from a young French count, with whom he had associated a good deal in Brussels.

"Why, Alec, what is the matter?" asked his sister, in allusion to the action and grimace which accompanied it.

"Matter enough, by Jove!" returned Alec, dropping his artificial manner.

"Who do you think has just arrived?"

"Papa, I should say," rejoined Eva.

"Then you would say wrong. Look here, Eva," and, drawing a small object

from his pocket, Alec extended it towards her.

"Oh, Alec! It can't be that letter papa asked you to post?"

"But it is, though, by Jove," answered her brother, with an uneasy laugh; "What on earth am I to do? Won't the governor be in a terrible rage? You see, when we were talking together yesterday morning, after he left, I put it into my pocket. Then I changed my coat to go to Sandyford, and the long and short of it is, I entirely forgot all about it. And, by Jove, they've come!"

"Oh, Alec!" again exclaimed his sister. "Do you mean that Lady St. Aubyn has come?"

"Yes, she and her daughter, and, I suppose, her maid. At any rate, there are three women and a number of trunks down below there."

"You have spoken to them, then?"

"No, indeed, I haven't."

"Then, how do you know, Alec, that it is they? I don't understand your talking of three women and a number of trunks. That is scarcely the way in which the arrival would be announced to you."

"No, of course. It wasn't announced to me at all," explained Alec. "I had been in the billiard-room, you see, knocking the balls about for a bit of practice. But I had got tired, and was going to look for you, when I heard a lady's voice in the entrance hall, and the sound of boxes being set down. Then the whole thing flashed upon me in an instant. I remembered that I had forgotten the letter, and I knew it was the St. Aubyns who had come. Well, I peeped into the drawing-room, and found you were not there, so I turned back and rushed up the east staircase to see if you were here. And, in passing, I looked over the balustrade and saw them all. Hello,

there's some one knocking. Now we shall know."

Followed by Eva, Alec hastened to the door. It was the butler himself, the major-domo of the establishment, who stood outside—a portly, grey-haired man, who had lived nearly forty years in the Northbrooke family, and who had been much esteemed by the two Sir Clements, father and son. By him the question was at once set at rest. Alec's intuitions had not deceived him. It really was Lady St. Aubyn and Lady Helena St. Aubyn who had just arrived. The butler had shown them into the larger drawing-room, and that gentleman was evidently offended that no intimation had been made to him beforehand respecting the advent of the illustrious guests.

"Nor it havn't been mentioned, it seems, to the housekeeper, neither, my lady—beg pardon, *ma'am*, I mean; so, in course, she

couldn't give no extra orders about dinner."

"Lady St. Aubyn was not expected, Elliot," remarked Eva, with dignity, "or all necessary instructions would have been given to the servants. But how is it that Sir Romney has not yet returned?" she went on, in a different tone. "Did he come by that train, Elliot?"

"No, ma'am, he didn't. Joseph was at the station ten minutes before the time of master's train, and just as the one got in that my lady, the Marchioness, came by. And when Sir Romney didn't come by the down express, Joseph, he inquired, ma'am, when the next train would be; and he found there wouldn't be another from London till 7.15. So he brought my lady and Lady Helena home, ma'am, and now he have gone straight back for master."

"Thank you, Elliot," said Eva, courteously; and with a respectful and conciliated

bow the butler retired to make way for the housekeeper—a bustling little woman, who now approached to ask which room Miss Northbrooke would like prepared for Lady Helena, and to inform her that, fortunately, there was already a fire in the “amber room,” which she supposed would be the most suitable one for Lady St. Aubyn. Dismissing her as speedily as possible, Evelyn turned to her brother. “You will go down with me, Alec?” she asked.

“No, no; go yourself, there’s a darling,” he entreated. “By Jove, I feel so nervous I daren’t face them just yet. We can’t turn them out, of course; but the governor seemed so determined they shouldn’t come that I’m afraid there’ll be the deuce of a row when he gets back and finds them here. You *will* try to smooth it over with him about my forgetting the letter, won’t you, Eva?”

Eva gave the promise required of her.



Then, Alec watching her from the top, she proceeded to descend the magnificent marble staircase which conducted to the entrance-hall, her feet falling silently over the soft turkey carpet which covered the centre. To be thus left to bear the brunt of a difficulty without assistance from Alec was nothing new in Eva's experience. Since almost her earliest childhood this brother—three full years her senior—had, in all moments of emergency, been accustomed to rely upon her in a similar fashion, to thrust her in a like manner to the fore-front of the battle. Their common troubles she had had to face alone, and out of all his personal scrapes and perplexities Alec had looked to her to help him. For herself, Eva had never expected from him either advice or support. She was well used to take the lead in matters that concerned them mutually; and, though she was too loyal in her affection for him ever to

have admitted the fact to another, she was perfectly aware that the excitable, unreliable youth would prove but a broken reed to lean upon, and she was never, therefore, tempted to try the experiment. At the present moment, however, support and encouragement, had it been forthcoming, would have been particularly grateful to her ; for, on the score of this unexpected visit from Lady St. Aubyn, she was herself feeling unusually nervous, and, perhaps, unreasonably apprehensive.

Notwithstanding her conviction that a reconciliation between her father and his only sister was a thing unquestionably to be desired, Eva would, under any circumstances, have shrank, personally, from meeting Lady St. Aubyn. It was not that, whilst so near a relation, the Marchioness was yet a complete stranger to her ; nor was it that Evelyn was overpowered by the prestige of her rank ; though to a girl

whose early associations had been such as hers the circumstances could not, of course, be without its effect in increasing her diffidence. But the truth was that she was violently prejudiced against her ladyship, and very naturally so, on account of her treatment of her father—of that father whose memory she had so dearly loved whilst she belived him to be dead, and who still existed in her imagination as a totally different person from the real and living parent with whom she strove in vain to identify him.

Moreover, it was uncomfortable to reflect that, by having vainly applied to her for recognition and assistance, Alec had aggravated the painfulness of the situation, and it was also disagreeable to believe that, by reason of their mother's low birth, this proud lady would feel justified in looking down with contempt upon her brother and herself. In no case, then, excepting for her father's

sake, would Eva have wished to make the acquaintance of this unknown aunt of hers. But now, to meet her under the existing state of affairs presented itself in the light of a serious trial. To have to go to her alone, as she was about to do; to be obliged to introduce herself, and to play towards her the part of hostess—conscious, all the while, that her being here at all was the result of a mistake, and with the fear hanging over her that it might issue in extreme unpleasantness—was a situation which Eva found by no means agreeable. For how her father would comport himself towards this sister who had formerly disowned him, and with whom, in his turn, he had certainly intended to refuse to be reconciled, when he should find her actually beneath his own roof, she could not imagine.

Whatever might be the consequence, however, a meeting between them was now

apparently inevitable ; and Eva could only hope that matters would turn out more happily than there seemed cause to anticipate.

Pausing at the door for a moment, in order to gather courage for the dreaded interview, Miss Northbrooke passed into the room where her aristocratic relatives awaited her. Outwardly calm, a slight flush on her beautiful face alone indicated the mental discomposure she was suffering. On her entrance both ladies rose ; but Lady St. Aubyn happened to be the nearer, and upon her Eva's eyes first rested.

And very curious and unlooked-for was the effect upon herself of that initiatory glance. As though by magic the fear, the prejudice, the distrust and dislike with which a moment before she had been inspired against Lady St. Aubyn vanished, or, rather, all these feelings were lost and swallowed up by another sentiment which

took possession of her in her aunt's regard.

That sentiment was pity—a conscious and unavoidable movement of compassionate interest. But how had that remarkable change in the attitude of Eva's mind been brought about? By what means had this extraordinary revolution of feeling been effected? Was the Marchioness St. Aubyn deformed, crippled, blind, or the victim of some patent and terrible disease? Or, did Eva fancy that she had detected in her countenance some signs of mental aberration or intellectual vacancy?

Nothing of the kind. The Marchioness was a tall lady, with a graceful, well-proportioned figure, an elegant and commanding carriage. Her features were good; and in her early days she had been accounted beautiful. In some respects her face was beautiful still. But, oh! what a sad, sad face it was! There was that in

it which moved most people—as Eva had been moved—to compassion; but there was that, also, which would have prevented any one blessed with a grain of tact or perception of character from giving expression to the emotion.

For sixteen years—the extent of her married life—Lady St. Aubyn had led a miserable existence. The yoke of matrimony had proved in her case almost more than flesh and blood could bear. For the sake of her children, however, whom she passionately loved, Lady St. Aubyn had borne it unflinchingly. She had now been five years a widow; but the marks of what she had undergone (and it was much, as shall be shown hereafter) remained indelibly impressed upon her physiognomy. At forty-seven, which was her present age, she looked fully ten years older. Her hair was grey, or, more correctly speaking, white. Her cheeks were sunken, 'and her complexion

pallid, though the impression conveyed was not that of ill-health. Her brow—Lady St. Aubyn had evidently never allowed herself to contract a habit of frowning—was perfectly smooth. In fact, with the exception of certain lines about the mouth, her face was entirely unwrinkled. But those lines told a tale which he who ran might read—a tale of suffering; but of suffering proudly and resolutely endured. In the dark eyes, moreover, was an expression which coincided with that of the mouth—a quiet watchful look; but anxious, wistful, pathetic—the kind of look which may be observed sometimes in the eyes of a confirmed invalid, or in those of a dumb animal in pain. For the rest, Lady St. Aubyn's face was intellectual; and whatever might have been the nature and extent of her troubles it was plain that they had not had the effect of crushing her spirit or weakening her will.



Actuated by the impulse of sympathetic feeling which a rapid scrutiny of her aunt's features had induced, Evelyn frankly tendered her hand ; offering, at the same time, an apology for having been so long in making her appearance. Lady St. Aubyn took the proffered hand, and, as she gazed into Eva's lovely face, a look of surprise and pleasure lighted up her own.

"You are Miss Northbrooke? You are my niece, Evelyn?" she asked, half incredulous of the obvious fact. "I am glad to make your acquaintance. Will you give me a kiss, my dear?"

Without hesitation, Eva did as she was requested ; and although she thought her aunt's manner somewhat patronising, she felt no inclination to resent it. Meanwhile, Lady Helena had approached, and, having received the salute she had asked for, Lady St. Aubyn proceeded to introduce her daughter. The latter was a tall, delicate-

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looking girl of nineteen; very pale, very plain, and Eva thought, at first sight, very uninteresting.

But she had not time just now for more than a cursory glance at her face, so that the judgment might be considered a little premature. No sooner had they exchanged kisses (the movement towards the embrace having originated with Lady Helena) than the Marchioness again claimed her attention.

“I am afraid, my dear,” she remarked, “that we were not expected this evening? And yet I feel sure I stated distinctly that it was *to-day* we should arrive. I was rather surprised, too, that my brother did not reply to my note—though there was, certainly, no absolute necessity for his doing so; and, of course, I took it for granted, from his *not* writing, that he was willing to receive us as his guests for a day or two, according to my proposal.”

“But I am sorry to say papa *did* write,” rejoined Eva, reddening, “though the letter, through forgetfulness on the part of my brother Alec, whom papa had asked to stamp it, was not posted.”

“Ah! And do you think that the letter was intended to postpone our visit? Or, perhaps, my brother wished to decline it altogether.”

Eva hesitated, and her blushes deepened. “I think—I fancy—” she began.

“Thank you, I understand,” interposed her aunt, quietly, “the latter, then, was the case.” As she spoke, Lady St. Aubyn coloured in her turn over brow and neck. But the flush quickly died out; and after remaining for a few moments silent and motionless, with her eyes fixed on the ground, she raised her head and resumed, in the low calm tones which were habitual to her, “I am glad that letter did not reach me. It was a fortunate accident, in

my opinion, that kept it back. The fact of the matter is, my dear Evelyn, that I am quite determined upon a reconciliation with your father."

"Indeed, I shall be very pleased, your ladyship, if it can be brought about," rejoined Eva, a little stiffly.

"It will be so, there can be no doubt; at least, I have very little fear upon the subject," affirmed the Marchioness. "In our younger days, when we lived at home together, I possessed great influence over my brother. Poor, dear Romney! He was a most amiable youth, though just a little wanting in firmness of character," she added, as though reflecting aloud.

"Papa? Wanting in firmness of character!" echoed Evelyn, in surprise; "that is the very last thing I should have said of him. To me, my father appears to be a man of particularly strong mind and inflexible will."

“Really! Then his disposition must have changed singularly,” observed Lady St. Aubyn, regarding her niece with an incredulous air. “But, no matter. When we meet, I feel assured all will be made right. He can never be discourteous to his own sister beneath his own roof! And I have set my mind upon making peace with him. He is my only brother, my nearest relative after my children; and ever since I have known that he was alive, I have longed for a re-union. Have I not, Helena?” she subjoined, appealing to her daughter.

“Your ladyship will remember, however,” put in Eva, before her cousin could reply, “that the quarrel originated with yourself, and that it was aggravated by your refusal to help my father in his distress.”

“Pardon me, my dear, but I did *not* refuse to help him; and even had I done so, I should not have been to blame, for at

the time when he applied to me for that help I was no longer a free agent. I had not a farthing of money at my own disposal. All this, however, I have already explained to your father by letter. I have told him, besides, that I deeply regretted having allowed his unfortunate marriage (excuse me, my dear, but I could not, of course, avoid considering it such) to have caused so complete a breach between us. And I have assured him also, which is the truth, that when I heard of his supposed death I was extremely distressed, and that I repented with all my heart of the estrangement which had kept us apart, and which, acknowledging that it was my own fault, I entreated him to forgive."

"And I sincerely hope that he may forgive it," responded Eva. And the hope was sincere, notwithstanding that, even whilst experiencing it, she was reflecting how—despite the repentance of which she spoke—

her aunt had refused to recognise her brother's children. But for this conduct on Lady St. Aubyn's part, Eva had never been inclined very cordially to blame her. She had put herself in the Marchioness's place, and had tried to look at the matter from her point of view. Believing her brother to be dead, Lady St. Aubyn, she had seen, would naturally regard the children as having become in a more especial manner the property of their mother. To have acknowledged them would have been impossible without also acknowledging her. And since she had reached an age when she had been able to form some conception of her aunt's position in society, Evelyn had understood that to expect the proud Marchioness to own for a sister-in-law the keeper of a seaside lodging-house, or the wife of an obscure provision-dealer, was certainly to expect a good deal.

Then, again—the most painful consideration to herself of any—Eva had felt that Alec's letters, begging for the recognition and assistance he had coveted, would in themselves be sufficient to deter his aristocratic relatives from desiring to make his acquaintance. She had not seen those letters. The writing of them had been amongst the very few things which Alec had ever in his life done without consulting her. But she knew that they would be ill-spelt and ill-written (Alec's penmanship was a wretched scrawl); and she feared that their contents would present an apparent mixture of self-conceit and servility, which would lead to a false estimate, as she considered it, of Alec's general character.

On the whole, then, Evelyn had held both Lady St. Aubyn and Sir Clement Northbrooke very excusable in having declined in former days all communication



with her brother and herself ; though now, when she heard her aunt speaking of her regret and repentance on account of the quarrel with her father, it struck her that it was strange that she should have shown no willingness to make the only atonement in her power. The thought, however, only passed through her mind as an under-current of reflection, and did not occupy attention more than a second or two.

“Mamma,” said Lady Helena, breaking the brief silence which had followed her cousin’s last remark, “what an excessively uncomfortable position we shall be in if my uncle should prove unwilling to make friends with us, or to give us a welcome to his hospitality ! I feel already like an intruder.”

“Nonsense, my love !” returned her mother. “I have no fear, as I said before, as to the issue of our meeting. I intended to be reconciled with my brother ; and you

will find, I think, that I shall effect my purpose."

"Well, you generally do effect your purposes, mamma, that is true," said her daughter, smiling.

"And I trust you will in this case," said Eva, with less confidence of feeling. "But now, may I show your ladyship to your room? And I will ask for some tea," she pursued. "Papa will be at home, I expect, by eight; and we shall dine at half-past."

"Thank you, my dear, you are very kind. But, pray, do not say your ladyship! Will you not call me aunt? I assure you that it is with pride, as well as with the sincerest pleasure, that I at length make your acquaintance. If you only knew how your appearance and manners have astonished and pleased me! But it is not very polite, perhaps, to tell you that. Helena, I am sure, is charmed with her cousin!" and

Lady St. Aubyn turned her pale, sad, resolute face towards her daughter.

"Indeed I am, mamma," protested Helena, hastily. "And I hope you will call me by my name," she added, to Eva, "and not forget that I am your cousin."

To these courtesies Evelyn made some appropriate rejoinder. Then, marshalled by the housekeeper, she accompanied the guests up stairs to a spacious chamber, upholstered and draped with amber satin, which had been appropriated to Lady St. Aubyn. Adjoining the bedroom was a sitting-room or boudoir appointed to match with the same costly but somewhat gorgeously-tinted fabric. On a table in this latter apartment Evelyn perceived to her satisfaction that a little collation of tea cakes and fruit had already been spread by the housekeeper's thoughtful directions. In the bedroom Lady St. Aubyn's maid was engaged in unpacking her trunks; and,

leaving the unexpected visitors to refresh themselves and dress for dinner, she retreated to her own chamber to think over the aspect of affairs, and to perform her own toilet.

## CHAPTER V.

### A VEXED QUESTION.

**W**HEN she was dressed, Evelyn descended to an apartment known as the "blue drawing-room," and which was commonly used for evening occupation by the present family, as it had been by the former owners of the Hall, when not entertaining a numerous company.

Here she found Alec, faultlessly attired, but still in a state of nervous perturbation ; and she had scarcely time to encourage him with a few reassuring words before Lady St. Aubyn and her daughter appeared.

Plainly but richly dressed in the mourning which she still wore for her husband,

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and with her silver locks now uncovered, save for a dainty head-dress of black lace, the Marchioness looked, Eva thought, even more grave and melancholy, more stately and determined, than she had done in her outdoor habiliments. Having duly presented her brother, Eva left him to entertain his aunt; whilst she seated herself by Lady Helena, with whom as yet she had scarcely exchanged a syllable. Singularly enough, the cousins were dressed almost entirely alike. Both wore demi-toilettes of black tulle, looped up with coloured ribbons, over underskirts of satin; the colour in Lady Helena's case being blue, in Eva's a pale coral. In stature there was scarcely half an inch of difference; whilst in figure the two girls might have been moulded from one pattern. But here the resemblance between them ended. Their faces afforded a contrast, and a striking one. Had a stranger been asked to guess

which of the two was the daughter of the late Marquis of St. Aubyn, and which that of Mrs. Uhland, the provision dealer's defunct spouse, he would not have hesitated long as to his answer. That answer, however, would infallibly have been incorrect; for to Evelyn Northbrooke belonged the typical patrician face, with its grace, refinement and beauty; whereas Lady Helena's features were insignificant and commonplace. The complexion, moreover, of the latter was entirely colourless; her hair was blonde, and her eyes light, all of which gave her a faded, washed-out aspect. Nevertheless, Lady Helena St. Aubyn was not ugly; at least, no one thought her so who knew her well. Her face was of a kind that grows upon one. It presented an interest entirely independent of feature or colour—the interest imparted by mind.

But that her cousin was an unusually

clever, as well as a remarkably well-informed, young woman, Eva did not on the present occasion discover. The conversation they were holding together—if, indeed, it could be called a conversation at all—was by no means intellectual. Such as it was, however, Eva found considerable difficulty in keeping it up; her attention was distracted by more than one cause. To begin with, Alec's behaviour discomposed and distressed her. The poor boy was making the most painful attempts, whilst talking to the Marchioness, to appear entirely at his ease and to impress her with his gentlemanly manners. He had taken up an elegantly-bound and illuminated volume, over the pages of which he kept turning incessantly; fitting in his eye-glass one moment to glance at the book, and shaking it out the next, in the approved fashion, which caused it to fall to the length of the cord whereto it was



attached, and then to bob up and down against his waistcoat. Then (although, when ever he recollected himself, he reverted to the lisping drawl which he had acquired with so much pains) his nervousness made him lapse continually into a Lancashire brogue, and the rather loud and boisterous mode of speaking and laughing to which he had been accustomed in Sandyford.

Altogether, his efforts to appear unconstrained in the society of his aunt, whose rank he could not for one instant forget, but against whom he felt inwardly resentful on account of her former treatment of himself, were a dismal and complete failure. That he was restless and ill at ease Eva perceived with sympathetic pain ; and she noticed, too, that Lady St. Aubyn was studying him with a close and curious observation, even whilst evidently doing her best to restore his composure by her quiet courteousness of manner.

A second cause for Eva's distrait air, and for her inability to pay much attention to her own conversation with her cousin, was that she was listening for a summons which each moment she expected. The position of the blue drawing-room being remote from the entrance hall, the sound of an arrival could not be heard thence. But Eva had given orders that directly her father reached home she was to be informed of the fact, for she was desirous of seeing and speaking with him in private before any meeting took place with his visitors. Eight o'clock, as she had informed Lady St. Aubyn, was the hour at which Sir Romney's return was now to be looked for. That hour, however, passed; and minute after minute slipped by, yet he did not appear. It was close upon the half hour, and Eva was beginning to think that he could not have come by the train the coachman had mentioned, and to feel a

little uneasy on his account, when, at length, the intelligence that he had arrived was brought to her.

Murmuring an apology for so doing, she hastened from the room. Sir Romney was still in the hall, being disencumbered of his wraps, and she drew him into the library and closed the door.

“Papa, do you know who are here?” she asked, forgetting, in her excitement, to offer him any greeting.

“Yes, I know ; Joseph has told me,” was the baronet’s answer, given in a very calm and gentle tone.

“And you don’t feel annoyed, papa? You will meet them, will you not?” questioned Eva, in doubt as to the significance of her father’s quiet manner.

“I don’t see that I have any option in regard to the meeting, little one,” he replied. “That wom—my affectionate sister is evidently bent upon seeing me. If she was

not to be deterred from making a raid upon us by that letter of mine, nothing could have deterred her. Sooner or later an encounter was inevitable, so it may as well take place at once. Eva, what do you think makes her so anxious to see me? Does she seem—— How does she speak about me?"

"Very kindly, papa; most kindly," protested Eva, eagerly taking upon herself the office of peacemaker. "She is exceedingly anxious for a reconciliation. But, papa, you are not well?" she went on, remarking now, for the first time, as they drew nearer the light, that Sir Romney looked unusually pale. "I am sure you are not well?"

"Oh, yes, I am quite well, thank you, my dear child. A little tired, that is all," answered her father, taking the hand which she had laid upon his arm and imprisoning it in both his own. "But what does her

ladyship say, Eva? How does she excuse herself for coming here, notwithstanding my express refusal to see her?" Though his voice was low and quiet, a quick ear might have detected repressed anxiety in Sir Romney's accents.

"She has not done so, papa. She never got your letter," said Eva.

"Never got it?" repeated her father. She never got it? Ha! that puts another face on the matter. I could not understand her persistency. It looked—it seemed strange. Well, little one, now that your aunt is here, I suppose we must give her a welcome. We must try to patch up the quarrel and make it all right, eh?"

"Oh, yes, papa! I am so glad and relieved. It would have been dreadful to have had any unpleasantness. And I feel very sorry for poor aunt St. Aubyn. She does not look like a happy woman. Yes, *do* make it all right, papa, like a good

man ;” and Eva, as she spoke, gave her father’s fingers a little squeeze, doing violence by the act to an almost irresistible impulse, which had possessed her ever since he had taken it, to snatch her hand from his caressing grasp.

“And now, papa, you must run away and dress as quickly as possible. It is already past the dinner-hour.”

“Yes, yes, I will,” Sir Romney assented, musingly, “and I hope—I think all will turn out well. But how did it happen, I wonder, that my sister did not receive the letter? Is it possible—? Did Alec neglect to see it put into the post-bag as I requested him?” he asked, with a sudden change of manner.

“Oh, papa, please do not be angry. He is so sorry and annoyed with himself, poor boy, for having forgotten it. Do forgive him, and promise not to be displeased ; besides it was really better that the letter

should not have gone. You have half acknowledged that yourself, papa. So you ought to feel grateful instead of vexed. Come, now, promise, for my sake, as a special favour, that you will not say one cross word to him!" Thus obeying Alec's injunction that she should "stand by" him, Eva looked pleadingly up into her father's face.

Sir Romney answered the glance by one of passionate tenderness. "For *your* sake, my darling? Ah, Eva, what would I not do for your sake!" he exclaimed, suddenly drawing her towards him, and stooping, as though to embrace her. Hastily checking the movement, however, he let go her hand, and with a stifled ejaculation, which sounded like a groan, he turned abruptly away and walked towards the fireplace. Eva looked after him in surprise, and with the feelings of vague fear and unaccountable repulsion, which so often, against her

will, took possession of her in his regard, strong upon her. More than once, on account of his treatment of himself, Alec had stigmatised Sir Romney as an “unnatural father.” And Eva had endorsed the verdict, though never, perhaps, so fully as at the present moment. Unnatural, or at all events very *peculiar*, he certainly did appear to her just now, in his relations with herself, even more than with her brother. Why had he resisted that impulse—for Eva saw and felt that he *had* resisted it—to embrace her? Why, loving her so ardently as it was evident he did, should he never yet—during the whole of those fourteen months since his return from America—have given her one proper, hearty paternal salute? It seemed strange—incomprehensible—the more so in that Eva had twice offered him a filial kiss, which he had received upon his cheek, as it were under protest, and without attempt-



ing to return it. Wondering and puzzled over the fact, which now seemed to have been revealed to her—*i.e.*, that, however he might desire it, her father had, for some mysterious, inscrutable reason, resolved never to indulge his affection in this legitimate and natural way—Eva stood looking at him with wide-open eyes and a curious sense of uneasiness in her heart. In some measure, however, this was dispelled when, after standing for a few moments upon the hearthrug, warming his hands over the blaze, Sir Romney turned and walked briskly back towards her, saying in his usual tone :

“Now, little one, I will run off and dress in hot haste. Let dinner be put off for a quarter of an hour—I shall not be longer. And please convey my compliments to Aunt Muriel,” he added with a smile, “and say that I will be with her directly.”

## CHAPTER VI.

### AFTER TWENTY YEARS.

**I**N less than the stipulated quarter of an hour Sir Romney Northbrooke entered the drawing-room, where his presence had been anxiously awaited. Desirous not to intrude upon this first meeting between the long-estranged brother and sister, the three young people had delicately withdrawn to the furthest corner of the room, and Lady St. Aubyn advanced towards him alone.

“Romney! My dear Romney! My dear brother!” she exclaimed, throwing her arms round his neck. “How delighted, how thankful I am to see you once again!”

“And I, Muriel, am very glad to see

you," rejoined the boronet, returning her embrace and kiss, though without any warmth of emotion.

"Dear Romney!" repeated his sister, not at all disturbed by this lack of demonstration—she had anticipated an even colder reception—"My dear brother! Now let me take a good look at you." And still keeping her hand upon his shoulder, the Marchioness drew back and gazed into her brother's face.

"You are changed, Muriel—very much changed," remarked Sir Romney, taking the words out of her mouth which she had been about to address to himself. "In fact, my dear sister, I should not have known you. But twenty years, I ought to have remembered, cannot fail to have produced great alterations in the appearance of us both."

"Ah, yes, they have turned me into a grey-haired old woman," sighed Lady St.

Aubyn. "I do not wonder at your saying that you would not have known me. But *you*, too, are greatly changed. Yet, it is not so much in feature ; I recognize your features. It is—yes, it must be in the expression. That is wonderfully different. As a boy you were particularly bright and pleasant-looking. Now—ha ! we have both suffered. But will you take off those spectacles, Romney," she continued after a pause, "and let me look at your eyes ? There is no feature which alters so little as the eyes ; and yours are rather remarkable ones, and easy, therefore, to recollect. You remember how I used to tease you about the spots of brown on the blue iris ? I am sorry that you should require to wear spectacles, and especially dark ones like those."

"So am I," laughed Sir Romney, casting a hasty glance towards the trio grouped about the distant fireplace, "and particu-

larly sorry that I must, I think, ask you to excuse me removing them just now. The fact is that, even with them on, I can scarcely bear this brilliant light ;” and as he spoke the baronet turned his back upon the central chandelier. “A few years ago,” he pursued, “I suffered from an attack of acute inflammation, and I have ever since been subject to a constant recurrence of it. I am threatened, at present, by serious symptoms, and the principal object of the journey to London from which I have just returned was to consult an oculist. His orders with regard to exposing the eyes to light are very peremptory. I must not, on any account, he tells me, omit to wear either a shade or these dark preservers constantly, whether in natural or artificial light ; and he blames me for having gone without them in the house, as I have been in the habit of doing lately, and to which negligence he attributes

the present increase of weakness. However, if it will help you to realize my identity," he subjoined, with a little hesitancy, "I will remove them for a few moments."

"No, no ; pray do not !" remonstrated Lady St. Aubyn. "I need no assurance of your identity. How should I, when it has already been so clearly proved? But, ah ! yes ; now I *do* see something more like your old self !" she exclaimed ; for, despite her interdiction, Sir Romney had taken off the spectacles. That the unsubdued light gave him pain, however, was evidenced by the fact that his eyelids kept, opening and closing with a quick, incessant and, it was plain, involuntary motion.

Entreating him to replace the preservers at once, Lady St. Aubyn proceeded to express her distress that he should be afflicted in so sad and uncomfortable a manner, and her hope that a radical cure

might in time be effected. Then, once more embracing him, she referred to the two letters which she had written to him since his return from America; and repeated the assurances of regret they had contained on account of the quarrel which had first originated their estrangement, and of the subsequent unkindness which had been shown him by his family, and in which, as she now declared, she had been forced to participate against her will. Finally, her ladyship again implored his forgiveness, and urged that the faults and follies of times so long gone by ought to be forgotten on both sides, and all soreness of feeling in regard to them put away.

“I should be most happy to have it so,” Sir Romney replied, when at length she had ceased to speak. “But there is only one way, as it seems to me, in which this mutual forgetfulness and forgiveness can be ensured, my dear Muriel; and that is that

we should both agree to make no references whatsoever to the past. Reminiscences of childish days, and so forth, would be sure to lead to later and unpleasant recollections. The only safe way is to meet now on the ground of new acquaintances, which, in reality, we are—that is—of course, you understand what I mean?—on account of our long separation; and fraternal feeling will naturally spring up anew, from the mere knowledge of our close relationship. To tell the truth, I prefer, for every reason, to live in the present and to forget the past. You will easily see *why* I should do so, if you reflect! Ah! here comes the announcement of dinner! But, before we adjourn to the dining-room, I must be introduced to my fair niece. You understand my suggestion, then, Muriel, do you not? And the reason of it? You agree to let bygones be bygones, in every sense?"



“Yes, yes! It shall be as you wish,” acquiesced Lady St. Aubyn, motioning to her daughter to approach (for she, as well as Alec and Eva, still hung back from interrupting the low-voiced conversation of their parents). “And I can enter into your feelings, Romney. The past has no attractions for me either. I have had troubles, perhaps greater than your own, and I am not likely to trouble you by any sentimental references to days of yore. But I may now look upon our reconciliation as quite established, may I not? Helena, my love, let me introduce you to your uncle.”

“And allow me,” said Sir Romney, gallantly raising the young lady’s hand to his lips, “to say how happy I am to make your acquaintance, my dear niece; and to welcome you to my house. But we must not neglect our appetites any longer;” and offering his arm to the Marchioness, he led the way to the dining-

room, whilst Alec followed with the two girls.

Dinner passed pleasantly. Every one was in excellent spirits as a consequence of reaction from the anxiety, more or less intense, which each had been experiencing, and of the relief now felt at matters having arranged themselves so satisfactorily. And not the least agreeable of the little family party was Sir Romney Northbrooke himself. In his capacity of host he exerted himself to do the honours of his table to the uninvited, but, as it might now be judged from his demeanour, not unwelcome guests. And the complaisance which, to Evelyn's satisfaction, he extended even to his son, continued throughout the evening. Lady St. Aubyn and he talked much together, confining their conversation, however, to general subjects—to literature, art, and to travelling in connection with the late tour

abroad. Not a single reminiscence of the kind against which the baronet had protested cropped up. Not the faintest allusion was made by this reunited brother and sister to the days of their youth passed together at the Rectory at Briers-clough. No questions, moreover, were asked upon either side respecting those long years of complete silence and separation which had intervened, respecting Muriel's married life, or Romney's experiences in America. Once or twice, however, the Marchioness was on the point of expressing the amazement she felt at finding the brother whom she had known only as an idle, pleasure-loving youth—with a strong penchant for outdoor sports, but none for books—now developed into a man of acute and critical mind, well read, and, as it seemed to her, possessing a fund of varied information upon every subject she could introduce. But she

refrained, for this evening at any rate, from giving utterance even to this very natural astonishment ; and from literary and kindred topics the conversation eventually turned upon politics. Mentioning that her son, the young Marquis, was looking forward to taking his seat next year (when he would likewise come of age) in the Upper House, she inquired whether her brother would not like to go in for parliamentary honours, adding, with polite *empressement*, that she felt satisfied there would be no difficulty in his obtaining a seat. To this Sir Romney replied that he had no desire, and no intention, of entering in any way upon political or public life. His ambition was limited, he said, to a quiet enjoyment of his wealth, his home and the society of his children. Alec, however, he observed—and this was the first sneer he had indulged in for the evening—would, no doubt, in process

of time, become a bright ornament in the House of Commons, being well fitted by his talents and learning to take a prominent share in the government of the country. "Though, by the way," he went on, turning with simulated courtesy to his son, "I have not the slightest conception, my dear boy, what your political opinions may be. Have you any notion upon the subject yourself?"

"Well, not much, father, I must confess," answered Alec, who was playing a game of cribbage with Lady Helena; "but I will begin to read up and form some," he added, with a little deprecating laugh, and a flush of alarm, as he noted the cynical smile curling Sir Romney's lips, and feared that he was to be the victim of further personal attention. To his relief, however, the baronet, who had caught a pleading glance from his daughter, did not pursue the conversation, and nothing

occurred to disturb the harmony of the evening, which was enlivened by Eva's singing and by music from Lady St. Aubyn and Helena. Both the latter ladies were musicians of no ordinary skill, and of really scientific knowledge. They played high classical music, and with a wonderful command of tone and touch. But they were gifted, likewise, with true musical feeling, which caused them to be enraptured with Eva's exquisite voice, especially when she sang the tender, simple, ballad melodies of which she was so fond, and which best suited her voice. Besides being an accomplished pianist, Lady Helena played also upon the organ and the harp. She was delighted with Eva's instrument, whilst Eva, in her turn, was delighted with her touch of it ; and, helped considerably by this common interest, the two cousins, before they parted for the night, had conceived a sincere mutual liking.

"Oh! papa, have we not had a pleasant evening?" asked Eva, who had lingered to say good-night to her father after the rest had retired. "I can see that you are pleased, as it is so natural that you should be, papa, to be friends again with your only sister."

"Can you, dear? Yes, yes! Of course, I am pleased," he rejoined, his eyes falling suddenly before his daughter's, whilst a spasm, as of pain (which he instantly tried to cover with a smile), crossed his face. "Of course, I am pleased!" he repeated. "Yet, at the same time, I hope they will not stay more than a few days. An Englishman's house is his castle, you know; and I don't care to have mine besieged by too many people. My disposition is not very social, I am afraid, little one."

"Oh! but you make a capital host, papa. And you must begin to cultivate

your social qualities," protested Eva, to whom it had occurred that her father's remark afforded a good opening for breaking to him the news respecting the somewhat wholesale invitations which Alec (in a moment when it must be owned he had been considerably under the influence of wine) had bestowed upon a clique of young men whose acquaintance he had first made in Rome, but who had afterwards accompanied or followed the family from place to place. "Yes! you really must cultivate your hospitable feelings and social talents, papa. You don't know how soon you may be called upon to exercise them."

"How so? What do you mean, my child?" demanded her father.

Thereupon Eva proceeded to explain what she meant, a little timidly. Alec, she thought, ought to be allowed to invite his friends to his own home; and Alec



had taken the liberty of doing so without permission. He had asked no less than four young men, whose names she went on to specify, to come down to Brooke Hall for a week or two in the hunting season; and he was expecting them shortly after Christmas.

“The blockhead! The unmitigated blockhead!” exclaimed Sir Romney, to whom the whole four prospective visitors were particularly obnoxious, inasmuch as he believed them all to be more or less in love with his daughter. “The confounded idiot! I won’t have it, Eva! I won’t have those gaping, staring fools here! But tell me,” he went on, in a changed tone, seizing her hand, and bending an eager, penetrating gaze into her face, “tell me, Eva, do *you* wish those fellows to come? Is it possible that you can care for any of them? Stamer is handsome; and that young Wycombe, the brewer’s son, will,

I suppose, be immensely rich. Eva, tell me," Sir Romney's lips trembled as he put the question, "would you marry any of them?"

"None of them have *asked* me, papa," she answered, blushing crimson. "But no, no; a thousand times, no!"

"You mean that, Eva? Yes, I can see you do! Then let them come, if you wish it. It would be awkward to make the boy cancel his invitations; though he had no right to give them without my knowledge and consent, and I shall take care that it is the last time such a thing occurs. I have surely a claim to be consulted as to who is asked to the house."

"You certainly have, papa; and you are very good to give way so kindly now," said Eva, devoutly thankful to have again succeeded in smoothing the difficulties from Alec's path, yet wishing that she had not so often to be employed

in the uncomfortable task of go-between.


“Good night, papa.”

“Good night, my love. God bless my child! Sweet dreams visit her pillow!”

Which they did.

## CHAPTER VII.

### LADY ST. AUBYN'S SCHEME.

OU may go to Lady Helena's room for a short time, Spence, and wait there. I shall not require you just yet, said Lady St. Aubyn, upon entering her bed-chamber on this first evening beneath her brother's roof. "Sit down by the fire, Helena, I want to have a little chat with you."

Lady Helena obeyed, seating herself in a chair opposite to one wherein her mother had ensconced herself. "How curious it seems, mamma," she observed, "to see everything here just as it was in poor cousin Clement's time!"

"Yes," responded the Marchioness,

absently glancing round to assure herself that the maid had closed the door behind her. "Well, Helena, all has arranged itself very comfortably. What do you think of your uncle?"

"He does not impress me very agreeably, mamma, to tell the truth. I can see, however, that he is a decidedly superior man."

"Yes, that is the curious part of it," mused the elder lady, "for, as a boy, he was by no means superior. The experiences of his strange life must have developed his powers of mind and strengthened his character. Some time I hope that he may give me some account of how he spent all those years in America. But I did not like to ask him any questions this evening. In point of fact, I cannot realize yet that he is my brother. He seems like a perfect stranger to me. But, after twenty years, what

could one expect! The feeling, no doubt, is mutual. But it was not of him I wished to speak. What do you say about that boy and girl, Helena? Are they not wonderful?"

"Eva is wonderful, mamma," rejoined Helena with enthusiasm. "Wonderfully beautiful and attractive. I don't think I ever met a girl whose manners were so sweet and at the same time so dignified. But about Alec I see nothing extraordinary. He shocks one's prejudices rather—but he is only a natural product of his circumstances."

"Shocks one's prejudices? Nonsense, my love! He is a remarkably handsome and, I am sure, a very amiable young man."

"Oh, yes, he is handsome, certainly, in a boyish kind of way," assented Helena, "and, I dare say, he is amiable enough. But look at his manners, mamma. What polish!

What quiet self-possession, without assumption! And then, who could help admiring his conversation? Such depth of observation — such originality of wit — such elevation of sentiment!”

“Don’t be satirical, Helena. Sarcasm is always unbecoming in a young girl, and in the present case, it is particularly inappropriate. Considering his lack of advantages, Alec is surprisingly gentlemanly. And time will improve him in that respect. A clever, sensible woman, Helena, could make anything of him she chose. In the hands of a wife who could manage him he would be pliant as wax.”

Lady Helena regarded her mother with a questioning, half-alarmed glance.

“But, mamma, you would surely look upon the woman as foolish,” she asked, “who married a man she could mould and manage?”

“Indeed, I should not,” was the unhesi-

tating reply. "Better, a hundred times, my love, marry a man of weak and yielding disposition, than one of obstinate will and cruel, hard heart. Oh, my darling, not for worlds would I have you suffer as I have suffered; but I must not talk to you of that. Helena, Alec Northbrooke will only be a commoner, it is true, but he will be extremely wealthy. For an almost portionless girl, it would be an excellent match."

"Oh, mamma! You don't mean?—you are not thinking?"—Helena stammered.

"Of your marrying your cousin? Yes, my dear, I am; and I mean that it shall be so," said Lady St. Aubyn, with an aspect of determination about her mouth which made her daughter shudder. "This was one of the objects of my bringing you here—though, had I found him less hopeful, I should not have persisted in the idea."



“But, mamma, after having only seen him for one evening! It makes me blush to speak of such a thing!” expostulated the poor girl.

“Then, do not speak of it, my love; but think of it,” rejoined her mother. “I wish you to see the advisability of what I suggest, however, so that *I* must speak plainly, Helena; and it is necessary that you should know of my purpose, in order that you may do your part towards furthering it. You will not oppose yourself to what I believe to be for your happiness, Helena?”

“Oh! mamma, you know that I have never opposed you in anything in my life; that it would be of no use my doing so. But I could never love that boy! And,” she added, brightening, “there is not much likelihood that he will ever ask me to do so.”

“There is *every* likelihood of it, Helena.

He was very attentive to you this evening. You are the first girl, you see, with whom he has had an opportunity of associating on familiar terms in your rank of life; and he was evidently very much taken with your title."

"He repeated it often enough, at all events," said Helena, laughing, in spite of her uneasiness. "But, oh! mamma, it won't do! Why have you got this strange idea into your head? You know that I am not an attractive girl to gentlemen. I have been out two seasons now, and no one has paid me the slightest attention. You have got one pretty daughter, mamma, and she is going to marry well. You must be content to let me become an old maid."

"I shall *not* let you become an old maid, Helena. Had you a large fortune, or any fortune to speak of, it would be a different thing. And if you are not

attractive, my dear, it is your own fault. You have more brains than ninety-nine in a hundred girls, and if you *wished* to please you could do so, I am persuaded. If you had had beauty or wealth, my darling, I would have looked higher for you than this. But, as it is, we must not be too ambitious; though, indeed, to be the mistress of Brooke Court is not a position to be despised. Now, my child, you may leave me. Think over the matter, and make up your mind to second the efforts which I shall put forth to secure your happiness."

"But it will not secure my happiness, mamma. Indeed, the very thought of it makes me wretched!" remonstrated Helena, who was so accustomed to her mother's accomplishing everything she undertook by mere force of will and dogged resolution, that notwithstanding the slight grounds which existed for

expecting success in this scheme, she already looked upon Alec's making her a proposal as almost an assured thing. "But I thought, mamma, that we were to stay here only a few days?" she subjoined, trying to keep back her tears. "Uncle will, perhaps, not ask us to remain longer."

"Oh! yes, he will. Leave all that to me, my dear. And now run away; we will have a little further talk in the morning. Let Spence put your dress by and brush out your hair, and then you can send her to me."

Having thus dismissed her daughter, the Marchioness leant back in her chair, and with her melancholy eyes fixed on the fire, and her hands tightly clasped together, she set herself to mature her plans for bringing about the matrimonial alliance of which she had spoken so frankly to Helena, and which she believed would be so greatly to her advantage.

Lady St. Aubyn was a most devoted mother. For her children's sake she would willingly have sacrificed her very life; which, indeed, excepting for the passionate love she bore them, possessed little interest or value to herself.

For their good, or what she considered such, she would stoop to scheming and diplomacy, even to deceit and hypocrisy. For her own sake she would not have condescended to beg a favour, scarcely—perhaps, to have accepted a farthing from any one to save herself from starving; but for theirs, she would not shrink from doing violence in various ways to her proud and imperious nature. In the promotion of their interests she was ready to become all things to all men—to do or to dare anything. At present her chief anxieties were directed towards ensuring a future for her elder daughter. The younger, a pretty, merry girl of

eighteen, was already engaged, and most satisfactorily so—despite the fact that she had no fortune, or what, for her station in life, was equivalent to none. Her future husband was the Hon. Frederic, eldest son of Lord George Dunstable, a baron of ancient lineage, and just now Cecilia was paying a visit to his family, by whom she had been very kindly received. Poor Helena, however, had neither her sister's comeliness of person nor liveliness of disposition to counterbalance the lack of dower. But she was still young, and Lady St. Aubyn was bent upon making hay for her whilst the sunshine of this charm endured. Moreover, in a short time the Marchioness's position would be materially affected by her son's coming of age, and by the marriage which he intended shortly afterwards to celebrate, and she would then have less chance of arranging a good

match for Helena. But in order to make clear her ladyship's situation in regard to pecuniary and other matters a word or two as to the history of her married life must here be given.

Upon leaving Briersclough, on the occasion of her unhappy quarrel with her brother, Muriel Northbrooke, it will be remembered, had betaken herself to Brooke Court. Her uncle, Sir Clement, was at that time in very delicate health, but both from him and her aunt she had received a kindly welcome.

Shortly after her arrival, Muriel (notwithstanding her father's recent death) allowed herself to be persuaded by Lady Northbrooke—who was much addicted to gaiety—to attend a ball given by a county magnate, whose estate lay at some distance beyond Narrowtown. At that ball she first met the Marquis of St. Aubyn, then a man of sixty-five (just forty years her own

senior), but still, for his years, handsome and well-preserved. Evidently attracted by her appearance, the Marquis paid her that evening the most marked attentions, and in less than three weeks she was engaged to him. Yet of his previous history she knew nothing whatever, and of his true character she was in equal ignorance. He was a marquis; by marriage with him she would become a peeress; that, for the proud, ambitious girl was sufficient. It proved, also, to be sufficient for her relative and natural guardian, Sir Clement Northbrooke; for, despite several evil reports which had reached him respecting the elderly lover, he readily gave his sanction to the union.

Being accepted, the marquis urged that the marriage should take place at once. But to this Muriel would not at first consent, declaring that she must wait until the year of mourning for her father should have expired. Circumstances, however, over-



ruled that decision. Sir Clement became worse, and was ordered abroad for the winter; Lady Northbrooke would, of course, have to accompany him thither.

Her cousins, Matilda and Kate, were at school in Paris; and Muriel could not very well remain at Brooke Court with the only other member of the family, her cousin Clement, for sole companion.

Accordingly, yielding now to the Marquis's solicitations, she agreed to the perfectly quiet wedding he suggested; and the ill-starred couple were married, with only one or two witnesses, at Narrowtown old church.

It was not until some little time afterwards that Muriel learned that certain very liberal settlements, which the Marquis had made a pretence of submitting to Sir Clement, had not been signed previous to the union; and that the omission had been by design on Lord St. Aubyn's part, who

had taken advantage of her uncle's serious illness, and of her own ignorance about legal matters, to postpone the matter until it was too late.

By her marriage, under these circumstances, the £40,000 which she had inherited from her father became the property of her husband; and Muriel speedily discovered that, although he certainly admired her physical beauty, her possession of this money had been the chief inducement to his lordship's offering her marriage. On the very day after the wedding, every penny of it passed into the hands of an urgent creditor, who had been threatening him with legal proceedings, and whom the Marquis had been at his wit's end how to appease; for the estates were strictly entailed, and already he had raised every farthing that it would be in his power to raise for some years to come. Had he been able to persuade any more wealthy lady to

marry him, it is probable that Muriel Northbrooke would not have been asked to have become Lady St. Aubyn. But in the fashionable circles whereto, as the daughter of a quiet country rector, she had never, of course, been admitted, the character of the Marquis of St. Aubyn was but too well known; and one or two efforts which he had previously made in the direction of recuperating his fortunes by marriage had failed. As poor Muriel was not long in discovering, he was, in fact, a spendthrift and a *roué* of the worst description. At the age of sixty-five he still carried on intrigues, and led a life of sensual pleasure which he scarcely cared to conceal beneath the cloak of decency.

From the first he was never faithful to his young wife, and before the end of a year he began to show her very distinctly that he was becoming tired of her. Already she had learned another fearful lesson, viz., that

he had the temper of a fiend. During the first twelve months of wedlock she made several attempts to influence him towards a change of life. But in vain. Strong as was her own will, his was still stronger ; or, at least, the selfishness which was ingrained in his nature made him utterly impervious to expostulation, and indifferent as to anyone's opinion concerning him. The only result of reproach or persuasion on his wife's part was to elicit a furious storm of passion ; and, at length, after a terrible struggle with herself, the bitterness of which none ever knew, the Marchioness accepted the cruel fate whereto her folly and ambition led, and resolved to endure it with stoical calmness.

But the very fact that she succeeded in doing so irritated the wretched old lord against her to such an extent that by degrees he grew absolutely to hate her. It was not, however, until after the birth of her third child (an event which occurred

within four years of the marriage) that the unhappiness of the ill-fated lady reached its climax. From that time the Marquis commenced a course of systematic ill-treatment, designed, as she believed, to make her seek a divorce. Not content with loading her with deliberate insults, and using towards her every refinement of verbal cruelty, he at last, exasperated by her proud silence, descended even to personal violence, and to her grave Lady St. Aubyn would bear the marks of his brutality. . At times, too, he would leave her, for months together, at Brandreth Towers, his seat in Dorset, uninformed of his whereabouts, and so ill supplied with money that sometimes her limited household was almost in want of food, whilst, as his wife knew, he was squandering his income on his own base gratifications. Afraid, however, that a separation from her husband might involve also a separation from her children, and

assured that in any case it would be to their disadvantage that publicity should be given to the miserable state of affairs which existed between their parents, she figuratively clenched her teeth, and for their sakes unflinchingly bore the Procrustean-like tortures to which she was subjected. Nothing could conquer her spirit or drive her to desperation. In cold proud endurance she suffered all that her husband chose to inflict; and thus, the victim of a capricious, malevolent, and thoroughly vicious man, poor Lady St. Aubyn dragged out the weary years of her married life.

Eventually, however, when he had reached the age of eighty-one, death released her from her tyrant. But the deliverance had come too late to enable her to cast off the effects of her thralldom. The galling chains which she had worn so long, and with so brave a face, had eaten into her very heart, and the excoriated wounds

were beyond the power of healing. Never again could Lady St. Aubyn be a happy woman, though she still knew how to make herself a very agreeable one, and was ready whensoever the interests of her children demanded it to exercise that gift.

Incapable, as of necessity such men must always be, of real affection, the Marquis had nevertheless entertained some liking for his son and eldest born. For his daughters he had cared little or nothing; and on his will being opened, it was found that he had left only ten thousand pounds to be divided between them on the death of their mother, to whose use the comparatively pitiful sum was assigned for her lifetime. Everything else, real as well as landed property, devolved to Charles, now the Marquis, and was, indeed, little enough to keep up the dignity of his position. Knowing how his father had wasted and impoverished the patrimony, Lady St.

Aubyn had been anxious for Charles to marry a lady of fortune. But, to her extreme disappointment, he had fallen in love with the fifth daughter of a poor Irish earl; and not only did he insist upon marrying her—despite the entreaties of his mother, whose firmness of character he inherited—but he was also determined that the marriage should take place directly upon his attainment of his majority.

A few months hence, therefore, Lady St. Aubyn would be compelled to choose between two alternatives—that of remaining at Brandreth Towers as the guest of her son and his wife (in regard to whom her mortification had induced positive dislike), or of seeking a new and necessarily very inferior home for Lady Helena and herself. It was in view of this impending crisis that the Marchioness was now so anxiously bent upon securing for her daughter a wealthy alliance.



## CHAPTER VIII.

### LADY HELENA PROVES OBEDIENT.

**T**HE date upon which Lady St. Aubyn made her appearance so unexpectedly at Brooke Hall was the seventeenth of December. In accordance with her own suggestion when proposing it, the visit was to last two or three days ; and during that length of time nothing was said, either by herself or her host, about extending it. But, meanwhile, the Marchioness used her best endeavours to cement the friendliness of her relations with her newly-restored brother. She cultivated likewise an affectionate intimacy with Eva, and contrived, by keeping her constantly at her own side, to throw Alec

and Helena very much together. The latter, although she had wept bitterly over her mother's scheme on the night when it had first been broached to her, had since put herself obediently under her direction in reference to it. To yield to Lady St. Aubyn was for most people who knew her much easier than to resist, and Helena had always been accustomed to implicit compliance with her wishes. Moreover, with regard to the present matter, she foolishly tried to persuade herself that she was indifferent. Poor girl! at nineteen, she believed that she had already outlived the poetry and romance of existence! She had loved, and she still loved, some one who, she felt sure, would never ask her to be his wife; and, as marriage with the man to whom she had given her heart was thus out of the question, it mattered little to her, Helena thought, to whom she gave her hand.

to his cousin about statues and pictures.

Nevertheless, though barren on this point, Alec's late tour through Europe proved prolific of subjects for conversation, wherewith he sought to entertain Lady Helena. He had quantities to tell about the people he had met at the various hotels he had stayed at, about places of amusement he had visited, about little adventures that had befallen him, and gay and curious sights and scenes he had witnessed. And Helena, when once she had realised that it was of no use attempting to exchange with him any rational ideas, proved herself a very pleasant companion. Studying him the while, as a *rara avis in terris*, and amusing herself by gauging the profundity of his ignorance and the shallowness of his understanding, she drew Alec out by judicious questioning, and made him chatter away to her almost

incessantly, whilst she herself remained comparatively silent. She listened, however, with apparent pleasure and simulated interest; and Alec, who was particularly fond of hearing his own voice, very soon began to find his cousin's society delightful. Each day he manifested increased partiality for it; and this partiality was kept alive and quickened by Lady St. Aubyn, who, trading on his vanity and weakness, kept repeating to him cunningly-devised little speeches which she pretended had been made to her by Helena, and which were full of pointed flattery respecting his appearance, disposition and manners.

Naturally, Alec's self-love was highly gratified. To be liked and admired by this cousin, of whose title he was never for one moment oblivious, and about whose voice, air and carriage he could detect the subtle aroma of rank and fashion, filled him with pride and elation. Still, though he sought

her appreciative company at all hours and seasons, matters progressed no further. During these first days of their intercourse Alec spoke no word and gave no sign of falling in love with Lady Helena. Had it not been for that recent visit to Sandyford, and the consequent revival of his sentiment for Jessie Bennett, it might have been otherwise. But, as it was, the memory of Jessie's dark eyes and rosy cheeks frequently obtruded itself as he glanced at his cousin's colourless face, and counteracted in some measure the effect of the flattering preference in which he so fully believed. Time and trouble, Lady St. Aubyn perceived, would be requisite to the compassing of her ends. Both, however, she resolved should be forthcoming.

Looking up from a letter which she had been reading at breakfast, on the morning of the twenty-third, she remarked to her brother :

"This is from Charles, Romney, written just before he left home. He sailed for Ireland yesterday."

"Indeed?" said Sir Romney, with a shade of embarrassment in his tone. For, at the moment when she lifted her head to address him, he had been regarding Lady St. Aubyn with a slight frown on his brow, and wondering whether or not she would propose to leave the hall that day.

"Yes. He is going to spend the Christmas at Tullycairn Castle."

"With his *fiancée*, I suppose?"

"Yes, that is the Earl's place. Cecilia, too, will remain for quite a fortnight longer at Lord Dunstable's; so that, if we were to return to the Towers, Helena and I, you see, would have to pass this festive season alone. But, my dear brother, why should we separate so soon after our happy reunion? It would be shocking to do so, and especially at Christmas time, would it

not? Indeed, for my part, I couldn't bear it. You must therefore choose, my dear Romney, between two courses. You must either kindly consent to extend your hospitality to us, or you and Alec and Eva must all go back with Helena and myself to Dorset to-morrow. Now, which shall it be?" she asked, with a smile.

Sir Romney hesitated sufficiently long to make the silence painful.

"I shall be pleased if you will stay with us until after the new year," he then replied, very coldly, and with a stiff bow.

Eva, however, blushing at her father's curt, ungracious manner, hastened to second the invitation very warmly, whilst Alec added his eager enthusiastic support. And, affecting not to have noticed her brother's lack of cordiality (though the crimson spot which burned for several minutes in her thin white cheeks showed

that she had done so), Lady St. Aubyn thanked him, observing that she would prefer the return visit to the Towers taking place when all her family were at home, and repeated that Helena and she would have great pleasure in remaining in their present quarters until after New Year's Day.

Before that day arrived, however, Sir Romney had himself voluntarily begged for a still further extension of the visit of his sister and niece. On the occasion when Alec had invited his four gentlemen acquaintances, he had, as we have before stated, been somewhat under the influence of wine; and, although he recollected perfectly giving and pressing the invitation, he had forgotten that he had fixed a definite time—the first week in January—as the date for his friends' arrival at the Hall. Of this fact he was reminded by the letters which now reached him from



one after the other. Captain Stamer and Captain Norris, who were friends and fellow-officers in the same crack regiment, would, they announced, make their appearance together on the afternoon of the 3rd inst. Young Wycombe, the brewer's son, would arrive, he wrote, on the 5th. The remaining gentleman excused himself, with much regret, from fulfilling his engagement, on account of the very serious illness of his father.

Having already promised Eva that he would receive his son's guests without opposition, Sir Romney said very little when the news of their speedy arrival was reported to him. But, after giving ten minutes to solitary reflection on the subject, he went in search of his sister, and proffered a request that she would remain at the Hall until after the departure of these additional visitors. He begged her, moreover, to act during their stay

as the mistress of his household—representing that Eva was, as yet, too young to play the hostess to gentlemen, and especially to young ones. In this opinion Lady St. Aubyn fully coincided; and, as Alec had not even yet advanced to the point of offering himself to Helena—though the Marchioness believed that she saw symptoms of that crisis approaching—she readily assented to the proposed prolongation of her visit.

## CHAPTER IX.

### A FESTAL OCCASION.

**F**OR nearly a fortnight Brooke Hall had been alive with company and merriment. Anxious, apparently, to gather as many ladies beneath his roof as possible during the invasion of Alec's three gentlemen friends, Sir Romney had driven over to the Dower House, and had asked his cousins, Miss Matilda and Kate Northbrooke to join the party at his house. Finding, moreover, that these ladies had themselves a visitor—a young and good-looking girl, named Miss Hennessy—he had likewise pressed her to accompany them. In this new fit of hospitality he had also suggested that Lady St. Aubyn should send,

too, for her younger daughter, Cecilia. But to this, for reasons of her own, the Marchioness had objected.

For some nine or ten days after the advent of the two captains, the weather had proved exceptionally favourable, and the business of hunting (there existed two packs of hounds in the neighbourhood) had been religiously attended to. Alec, who delighted in equestrian exercise, and who sat his horse as though to the manner born, had shown no inclination to sacrifice this exciting and to him novel pastime to that more serious one wherein he had latterly been engaged of making love to his cousin Helena.

On the part of the other young men, however, Sir Romney had more than once detected signs of a covert desire to remain at home with the ladies, none of whom cared to follow the hounds. Any hint or suggestion, however, to that effect upon

which they had ventured had very decidedly been nipped by him in the bud. The young men had come to Broomdale with the avowed object of hunting, and hunt the Baronet had been determined they should. Moreover, as the meet had generally been at some distance, and the chase as a rule had led in a direction opposite from the Hall, the party of gentlemen after leaving early in the morning had seldom returned until close upon the dinner hour.

But, although thus separated during the daytime, all the inmates of the house had, of course, spent the evenings together ; and those evenings had proved quite long enough for the accomplishment of some of the mischief against which Sir Romney had wished to guard. So many ladies and gentlemen, all free and unmarried, and the majority of them young, could scarcely have been expected to pass ten consecutive evenings shut up to each other's society in

a country house without a little flirtation if not actual love-making, going on between them. And, in good sooth, there had, in the present case, been a considerable amount of love-making ; though most of it, to the Baronet's supreme annoyance, had been directed towards one object—his daughter. Notwithstanding the distractions which he had hoped to provide in the shape of other ladies, he had not succeeded in bringing into the house any who in the remotest degree could have pretended to a rivalry with Eva. With her beauty, her grace, her sweetness of expression and manner, she must indeed have stood pre-eminent in attractiveness amid hundreds instead of units of her sex. Both the young officers, it was evident, had entirely lost their hearts to her. To be allowed to offer her a flower, to provide her with a footstool, to fetch or carry anything she required, would render either of them

ecstatically happy until a similar service was accepted from his rival. But as Eva had hitherto contrived that no favour should be extended to the one which she did not immediately counterbalance by an equal kindness towards the other, all rejoicings upon this score had been short lived. So far, neither of the young men, who kept guard over each other with jealous watchfulness, and who were ready at a moment's notice to be transformed from close friends into bitter enemies, could flatter himself that he had received any token of preference. Eva treated both with courteous indifference and the strictest impartiality. Each felt that he was kept at arm's length; that to press his suit would only be to ensure an unhesitating rejection thereof. But each had the satisfaction of believing that his rival was in a like case.

Another person, too, who had observed very closely Evelyn's comportment towards

her military lovers, and who was capable of profounder jealousy than either, had seen no occasion for the exercise of that amiable feeling. His beloved daughter, Sir Romney Northbrooke was at length becoming convinced, stood in no danger of being robbed from him by either Captain Stamer or Captain Norris. As for Philip Wycombe, the wealthy brewer's son, he had already tried his fate. On the third evening after his arrival at the Hall he had managed to get Eva alone for a minute or two, and had there and then rushed into a proposal, despite all her efforts to prevent it. Eva had refused him very kindly, and had kept his secret even from her father. The latter, however, had guessed it ; and when, for a couple of days, the young man had worn a melancholy, dejected air, the Baronet had shown him special friendliness, in his half-disdainful, cynical fashion. But young Wycombe's case, it had soon become



apparent, was not one that called for any particular pity. Blessed with a happy freedom from all deep feeling, and with a temperament even lighter and more mercurial than that of Alec Northbrooke, he had quickly rallied from his disappointment ; and now, perhaps with a view of completing his own cure, or possibly with more serious intent, he was beginning to transfer his attentions to Lady Helena St. Aubyn. Noting this fact with secret satisfaction, the Marchioness instigated her daughter to give the brewer's son some encouragement. During Christmas week, when there had been no hunting, and no other guests to divert his attention from his cousin, Alec had been brought by the tactics of his aunt to the very verge of offering himself to Helena. But the assiduity of his courtship had since fallen off a little, and he still hung back from speaking those decisive words which would

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settle his own and his cousin's fate. The existence of a rival was exactly what was needed, Lady St. Aubyn believed, to bring him to the point; and she accordingly resolved that, though she regarded his aspirations as an impertinence, the tradesman's son should be suffered, indeed incited, to enter into competition with her nephew for Helena's favour.

Such, then, was the condition of affairs at the close of the second week in January, when, after those ten favourable hunting days, a sudden change occurred in the weather. A bitterly cold afternoon had been succeeded by a dull, cloudy evening; and when the party at the Hall awoke on the following morning a foot of snow lay upon the ground, and the white flakes were still falling. The usual sport was, of course, out of the question, and everybody was obliged to remain and seek amusement within doors. Now, it happened that on

this evening there was to be a little dinner party at Brooke Hall; the first entertainment of the kind that had been given by the new proprietor. The guests expected were, in the first place, a Mr. Carrington, his wife, and three daughters. With the exception of the household at the Vicarage, and that of a Colonel Ralston, whose residence stood just beyond the church, Mr. Carrington was Sir Romney's nearest neighbour. A man of considerable wealth and excellent family, he owned a flourishing but not very extensive estate, situated some three miles further up the valley of Broomdale. Shortly after the Baronet's settlement at home, calls had been exchanged between the two families, and before the influx of the additional visitors, Lady St. Aubyn, himself, and the three young people had all dined at Westhill Park, as Mr. Carrington's place was called. And to his host on that occasion, whom he found to be

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a highly-educated man, though likewise a keen sportsman, Sir Romney had conceived an unusual liking (the Baronet was not apt to find his fellow-creatures attractive); and that liking had developed, through subsequent intercourse in the field, into something akin to friendship. Mr. Carrington's family consisted of his wife and five daughters, ranging in age from twenty-five to seventeen. He had no son; a fact which served greatly to increase Sir Romney's pre-possession in his regard. In the return invitation for this evening, all the five daughters had been included, but it had been accepted only for the three elder ones. The remaining guests were to be Sir Romney's still closer neighbours—Colonel and Mrs. Ralston; their niece, Miss Cunliff, and a gentleman to whom she was engaged; the Honourable Mrs. Dalziel; the Rev. J. Dalziel; Fanny and Clive Willoughby.

Since the afternoon when she had taken

suggestion. It was that, for the amusement of the expected company, a theatrical representation should be got up by the party in the house. Some years ago, as Kate was aware, the late Sir Clement Northbrooke, on the occasion of a juvenile ball and entertainment given in honour of his eldest son's birthday, had purchased a miniature stage; and the stage, as well as various theatrical dresses and properties, was still in the house—taken to pieces and stowed away in one of the disused rooms. For any elaborate preparation there was now little time, but a full day, all agreed, would suffice for the commission to memory of the spirit and gist of some simple play, if not the accurate wording thereof. At any rate, that the thing should be attempted was carried by acclamation, and the preliminary business of selecting a play was entered upon without delay. The choice was quickly made. Two copies

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of Goldsmith's comedy "She stoops to Conquer" were found in the library, and, the *dramatis personæ* required being comparatively few, it was adopted after only a few moments' debate.

Eva, though urgently entreated to do so, declined to act ; and the four ladies' parts were taken by Lady Helena, the two Misses Northbrooke and Miss Hennessy. Some of the gentlemen, it was found, would be obliged to take duplicate characters, but the two captains considered themselves equal to the emergency ; Sir Romney, like his daughter, refused to act. He consented, however, very courteously, to fill the office of prompter. All day, with their respective parts written out, the various actors were busy conning them over, mostly in separate rooms, and a dress rehearsal, late in the afternoon, proved the result to be satisfactory. Even Alec, to whom had been assigned the part of Tony Lumpkin,

had contrived to learn the few speeches he would have to make. That he would have done so without Lady Helena's assistance is, however, more than doubtful. But, having mastered her own rôle, Helena had taken her cousin in tow—and by dint of repeating, explaining and condensing his part, had managed to teach it to him, as she might have taught a lesson to a child. Grateful for this attention, and urged on, as Lady St. Aubyn had anticipated, by the marked assiduity which young Wycombe had begun to display towards her, Alec had ventured to be very affectionate to Helena. He had stolen his arm round her waist in the twilight, and, finding that he was not repulsed, had been in the very act of whispering a confession of the fancy (compounded of ambition and gratified vanity), which he dignified by the name of love, when a servant had entered to light the room where they were

seated alone. Put out by the interruption, Alec had not reverted to his avowal; and half an hour later he was congratulating himself, with a secret sense of relief, on the fact that he had not yet absolutely committed himself. To marry the daughter of a marquis would be a tremendous honour, and his cousin's preference was delightfully flattering, but then she was so plain, not at all like poor Jessie, whose dark eyes and rosy cheeks pleased his taste. Moreover, she was so clever that he felt half afraid of her. At all events, it would be as well, he had felt, to take more time to consider the matter.

The dinner, under Lady St. Aubyn's directions, turned out a great success. Shortly after its conclusion the party adjourned to a huge apartment, formerly used as a dining-hall, in the oldest portion of the house, where the stage had been fixed up. This room had an oaken floor,



temptingly polished, and the young people had agreed amongst themselves that the representation should be followed by a little impromptu dance.

Three or four rows of chairs had been arranged in front of the diminutive stage, and Sir Romney had intended to have acted as master of the ceremonies in regard to the placing of the spectators; an imperative summons to the green-room had, however, frustrated this purpose; and when, prompting-book in hand, he took up his station behind one of the wings, he saw that the very thing had happened which he had most wished to prevent. Of the five gentlemen who had been left among the spectators to play the part of cavaliers to double that number of ladies only one was young and disengaged; and that one, the Baronet perceived, was seated beside his daughter. The position occupied by the pair being at the end of the first

row of seats, Sir Romney found that he could manage so to place himself as to keep them in view. And although he did not once lose his place in the book, or neglect for an instant his duty as prompter, his eyes all through the play, which seemed to him of interminable length, kept vigilant watch over those two. And from an occasional glance, an occasional whisper, this strange father—so unnaturally and madly jealous of attentions paid to his own daughter—conceived a suspicion which sickened him with dismay, and which inspired him with an intense dislike to Mr. Clive Willoughby. Determined, however, either to confirm or dispel his fears by observation, he made no attempt to separate Eva from the young man's society; and for the most of the evening, unconscious of inimical glances that followed them everywhere, and oblivious of the fact that they were monopolising each other's

company in a somewhat marked manner, the two kept together. Eva danced with Clive and talked with Clive, and on her face the while there was an expression of shy happiness which mirrored the feelings of her heart, but which she used no effort to conceal, because she saw no reason for doing so. To look into Clive's honest blue eyes, and to read the admiration and tenderness which filled them, sent, each time she did so, a curious little thrill of delight through her frame. But in the regard which she felt for him, and the liking which she hoped he felt for her, Eva saw nothing whereof to be ashamed. For neither of them, in fact, had got beyond that delicious stage in love's history when the passion has only attained implicit not explicit existence ; when it is felt, but not as yet understood or acknowledged for what it in reality is. Eva and Clive both thought they *liked* each other very much ;

they did not know that they *loved* each other. To onlookers the truth was more apparent than to themselves.

“By George, Harry, there’s no hope for either of us; that’s plain,” remarked Captain Norris to Captain Stamer, in the course of the evening, grasping his friend’s hand with more warmth than he had exhibited for many a day.

“No; so we needn’t quarrel, old boy, need we? But I can’t stand the sight of another fellow’s luck. Let us get away to-morrow, Bob?”

“To-morrow? That would seem a little abrupt, would it not? Suppose we say the next day?”

“All right. But I wish to goodness, Bob, that I had never come here at all!”

In the solitude of his own chamber that night, Sir Romney Northbrooke passed several sleepless hours in wishing also futile wishes and indulging fruitless regrets. He

regretted that he had allowed his son's friends to come to the hall ; he regretted that he had asked his cousins to visit him ; he regretted that he had given his little dinner party that evening. He wished that he had never taken his children abroad, and so given them a taste for society ; he wished that he could now shut one of them up so far as to prevent her seeing any company but that of his own choosing ; he wished, with a terrible longing, that Mr. Clive Willoughby could be banished to the antipodes ; and he almost wished—the strangest wish of all—that his name was not Sir Romney Northbrooke !

## CHAPTER X.

### FROM THE JAWS OF DEATH.

**T**HE snow which had been falling early on the day of Sir Romney Northbrooke's dinner party had ceased about eleven in the forenoon, and forthwith there had set in a frost of extraordinary keenness. By nightfall the whitened ground had become hard as brick, and a coating of thin ice had covered every sheet of water in the neighbourhood. A couple of days later the ice had proved sufficiently strong to bear, and the juvenile population of the district was sliding upon every available pond and ditch. Directly after luncheon on the day in question a troop of young men and girls, the former carrying skates, left the Hall,

and proceeded to clamber up the wooded hill at the back of the mansion. The wood belonged to the estate, and brought in a good many thousands a year. Certain pasture lands, too, on the top of the hill and opposite slope were Sir Romney's property. So, likewise, was a lake, well stocked with fish, which filled up a hollow on the immediate summit. The lake was larger than either of the two ornamental sheets of water in the park, and for this reason the company of intending skaters had selected it as the scene of their exploits.

Amongst that company were the two gallant captains. Acting upon the resolution mutually arrived at, these gentlemen had intimated to their host, with many conventional expressions of regret, their intention of departing on this day. Upon learning, however, that the Misses Northbrooke and Hennessy were purposing also to take their leaves on the morrow, they had

yielded to a general persuasion that they should not break up the party until then, and to a particular one from Alec that they should stop and have one good afternoon's skating. With a view to carrying the latter proposition into effect the gentlemen had ridden over to Narrowtown in the morning in order to buy skates. But although they had gone to every shop in the town they had been able to procure only two pairs suitable for the ladies' use. Those two, it had been arranged, were to be consigned for the earlier part of the afternoon to Lady Helena and Miss Hennessy—both of whom were accomplished skaters. Afterwards Kate and Eva Northbrooke were to take on them their first lesson in the art.

Whilst awaiting their turn the cousins walked to and fro upon the margin of the lake, pausing frequently to watch the graceful glidings and gyrations of their companions, or to gaze admiringly round at



the scenery. On the further side of the declivity the snow-covered meadows sloped gently downwards towards the wide valley which opened out below, their whiteness broken only by the line of a tiny rivulet which issued from one end of the lake, and by the red brick house and outbuildings of Sir Romney's home farm. On the nearer and steeper side of the hill the tops of the trees alone were visible from where the young ladies walked—their branches thickly encrusted with frozen snow crystals that sparkled brightly in the cold wintry sunshine—as indeed did the entire landscape.

“How lonely we shall feel when you are all gone, cousin Kate,” observed Eva, breaking a silence which had continued for some time.

“We shall all be sorry to go, dear, I am sure,” rejoined her cousin, politely. “We have had a most delightful visit. I wish you could come and stay with us for a few

weeks at the Dower House, Eva. But, of course, it would be of no use to ask you."

Why not? Indeed, I should like it very much," said Eva.

"Ah, but Sir Romney would never give his consent," protested Kate. "I don't believe he could bear you out of his sight for a day. He is more like a lover, my dear, if you will excuse me saying so, than a father."

"Yes, he is very kind to me," said Eva, sighing.

"Kind? He worships the very ground you tread on. It is no poetical exaggeration to use the hackneyed phrase in this case. Yesterday, if I had not known that he was your father, I really—— You won't think what I am going to say impertinent, Eva?"

Eva shook her head.

"Well, I really should, I assure you, have felt certain, if I had not known the facts of

the case, that my cousin Romney was not only desperately in love with you—I mean as an actual lover—but, also, that he was desperately jealous of Clive Willoughby. All the time that the poor young man stayed yesterday, when he was calling, your father, I noticed——”

“Oh, hush, hush! Please hush!” interposed Eva, hastily.

“Are you vexed, dear? I beg your pardon; I did not mean to be rude. How you *are* blushing!”

“No, no. But, look! He is there. He is coming to us.”

“Who? Your father? Why, it is actually Clive himself! I wonder how he knew we were here,” exclaimed Kate, advancing frankly to meet the young man, who had just emerged from the wood, his face aglow with the healthful exertion of mounting the hill, and his eyes glistening with pleasure as he caught sight of Kate

and her companion. The latter, after following her cousin for a few steps, paused—overtaken by a new and unaccountable fit of shyness.

The shyness seemed to communicate itself to Clive as he came up and took her hand—forgetting in his embarrassment to release it again as quickly as he ought. “I have been calling at the Hall—at least I went to the door,” he stammered, gazing at her with a sudden softening of his own features. (In her sealskin jacket, and a very becoming beaver hat with long drooping feather, Eva was looking just now exquisitely lovely.) I ventured to send to London for that song of Heine’s that we were speaking of the other evening,” he went on, “and it came this morning, so I—I brought it for you, if you will be good enough to accept it.”

“Oh, thank you,” said Eva, withdrawing her hand at this juncture, and blushing to think how long she had allowed the young

man to hold it. "Thank you very much."

"They told me—I mean the servant said, you were all up here," continued Clive, making an effort to throw off his unaccustomed bashfulness; "so I ran up to watch you a little. But you are not skating—either of you," he added, turning to Kate.

"No, but we are going to try by and by," returned the latter, "though I rather dread the ordeal. Come and watch Lady Helena St. Aubyn, Clive; she skates splendidly"

"It is very kind of you to get me the song," observed Eva, as the three stepped together up the sloping embankment which surrounded the lake, "Thank you again for it."

"Thank *you* for letting me give it you," rejoined the young man, in a low tone. And after the interchange of these commonplace remarks, and of the glances which accompanied them, neither of them felt inclined to speak again for a few seconds. Both

were conscious that their hearts were palpitating with a delicious, half-comprehended emotion.

“What a pity you have not brought some skates, Clive; you might have helped to teach us,” said Kate, wondering how Sir Romney would feel if he could see young Willoughby by his daughter’s side. That the baronet detested Clive this very observant young lady had made up her mind, though she would have found some difficulty in substantiating the premises upon which her conclusion was based. And that Clive and Eva were in love with each other was likewise a very patent fact to her astute mind. How the affair would terminate she could not imagine; but, esteeming Clive as the best and finest young fellow in the world, she heartily wished him success in the courtship upon which he had not himself yet consciously entered, and she was glad her cousin was not here to prevent the

two from exchanging a syllable—as he had contrived to do yesterday, when Clive and Fanny had paid their visit of ceremony after the party. Whether he, also, was glad of it or not, Clive quickly noticed the Baronet's absence. "Sir Romney Northbrooke is not here, I think?" he remarked, casting a rapid glance over the lake.

"No. He did intend to have come with us," said Kate, but at luncheon he recollected that he had an engagement for this afternoon. On business, it was not, Eva?"

"Yes. Papa had forgotten that he had arranged for his steward to be at the house by four o'clock. How well you are getting on, Alec!" she called out to her brother, who was approaching the place where they stood.

"Getting on well! By Jove, I've been down about a dozen times, if you call that getting on well," rejoined Alec, who was looking very cross, a circumstance which

was to be attributed to the fact that Lady Helena and Philip Wycombe were practising figures together on the opposite side of the mere. "How do you do, Willoughby? Take my skates and have a turn."

"No, no, thanks. Not at present, at all events," returned Clive. "Shall we walk round the lake?" he added, turning to Kate and Eva, and bestowing a nod of recognition upon Captain Stamer, and taking off his hat to Miss Hennessy and Captain Norris, who were skimming along side by side.

The ladies complied with his suggestion by moving forwards. And placing himself between them, Clive directed most of his conversation to Kate, but most of his glances to Eva. On the first few occasions of meeting with her he had found so much to say to Miss Evelyn Northbrooke, had felt, indeed, as though he could talk to her for ever without exhaustion or weariness.



But now it seemed pleasanter to him, somehow, to walk by her side in silence, to gaze at her lovely countenance without speaking. And yet, strange to say, almost every time he looked at her Clive sighed, a curious way of showing that her presence filled him, as it it did, with happiness!

Up here, on the top of the hill, the air was decidedly keen, and the trio walked briskly towards the extremity of the lake furthest from the path leading down through the wood. At this end, that from which the stream issued, the lake narrowed considerably, and a portion of it was almost cut off by a small island which stretched across it, leaving only a contracted channel on either side, across which it would have been possible for a man to jump.

So far, none of the skaters had been beyond the island. Possibly they might

not have noticed that the water extended behind it. But, on returning after having walked a little way along the path which led to the Home Farm, Eva and her companions noticed Alec careering about alone in the centre of this nearly separated part. At the same time, they saw Captain Stamer coming through the channel, closely followed by Captain Norris and Miss Hennessy.

The next moment a sharp report rang through the air, succeeded by a series of slighter ones, intermingled with cries of alarm. Owing to the current caused by the stream, the water at this end of the lake was still but very thinly coated over, and under the combined weight of Miss Hennessy and the two officers, both of whom were tall, stoutly-made men, the ice had suddenly given way, splitting up and running out into cracks all over this semi-isolated portion.

“Keep separate, Miss Hennessy! For heaven’s sake keep away!” cried Captain Norris. “There, we are safe enough when we are not together. Now, go back to the other side of the island, and we’ll follow. By George, Stamer, I thought the ice looked uncommonly thin here.”

“Humph! And they say the lake is uncommonly deep, too. It’s well we haven’t got in. Hello, look how the ice is swaying up and down where Northbrooke is! I say, Northbrooke, do come away, man; it isn’t safe where you are.”

“Oh, it’s safe enough,” shouted Alec, with foolish bravado, although, at the sound of rending and crackling a few moments ago he had screamed lustily with terror.

“It’s all right. You fellows are easily frightened,” he went on, continuing his evolutions on the swaying ice.

“Don’t be a fool, Northbrooke! I

tell you the ice isn't safe there. Come away, man."

"I'll come away when I choose, and not before," retorted Alec, who was certainly in a bad humour this afternoon; "and I'll trouble you not to take that tone with me, Stamer. Look after yourself, and I'll do the same."

"What a confounded donkey the fellow is!" commented Captain Norris. But his remark was drowned amidst the clamour of voices now heard from the bank, where Kate, Clive, and Eva (the eager anxious tones of the latter conspicuous above the rest) were entreating Alec to come off the ice, which they plainly perceived to be insecure. In their importunities they were joined likewise by Lady Helena and Mr. Wycombe, who, on hearing the commotion, had hurried to the scene of action, and on reaching it had managed with some difficulty to scramble up the embankment,

which at this point was rather steep, in their skates.

“All right, good people, I’ll come off since you wish it. But pray don’t croak ; there’s nothing to make such a terrible fuss about,” cried Alec, beginning to approach very cautiously the spot where they were all collected, and feeling, despite his nonchalant words, extremely nervous, for he had caught the infection of their fears.

“There, he will be safe now in a few moments, Miss Evelyn,” whispered Clive, who half-unconsciously had laid hold of Eva’s arm. “He’ll be safe in a few moments.”

Scarcely had this assurance left the speaker’s lips before Alec, who was within half a dozen yards of the side, slipped heavily down upon his back. There was a resounding crash, a shriek of affright, a plunging and splashing, and poor Alec had disappeared below the water.

“Oh, my brother! my brother! Alec! Alec!” cried Eva, springing forward as though to rush down the embankment.

But Clive held her back. “Stay where you are! Dear Miss Eva, for God’s sake, stay where you are!” he exclaimed. “He will rise in a moment. Don’t be frightened, we shall save him.” And pushing her towards Kate, who at once seized her dress, he descended upon the ice. The two captains had also approached the hole which Alec’s fall had broken through, standing for safety one on either side, and anxiously awaiting his reappearance.

But moment after moment passed, and no Alec came to the surface.

“Good God! What’s to be done?” ejaculated Captain Stamer. “He must have been carried away by the current!”

“Oh! will no one save him? Will no one save him?” demanded Eva, in distracted accents.

The stalwart young officers regarded each other questioningly.

"I can't swim well," muttered Captain Stamer; "and, besides, I'm subject to cramp."

"It's such a confoundedly dangerous thing to get under the ice," answered Captain Norris. "No; I daren't do it; upon my soul I daren't."

"If we only had a rope, so that I could be hauled out again," protested young Wycombe, who still stood on the bank, "I'd go in in a minute."

"Oh, he will be drowned! You cruel men! he will be drowned," shrieked Eva! in frantic reproach, wrenching herself from Kate's hold, and about to rush down the embankment.

A gesture, however, from Clive Willoughby arrested the movement. The young man had torn off his coat and thrown away his hat.

“Eva, my love! my life! I will save him, or perish in the attempt!” he cried, indifferent at this agitating crisis to the fact that he was openly betraying the passion of the existence of which he had only become aware within the last few seconds, through the pain which her agony had occasioned him.

“No! no! no! Not you; not you!”

The wild remonstrance broke from her involuntarily, and Eva stretched forth her arms as if to draw him back.

But already Clive had disappeared. In another moment she felt her hands drawn gently down and herself clasped in a firm embrace.

Glancing round, she saw that it was her father who held her. But, though she recognised him, it was without any feeling of surprise at finding him there. Absorbed in the one terrible anxiety, all capability for other thought or sensation was lost.



Without a word, or second look, she stood motionless in his arms, her face deadly white, her lips parted and bloodless, her gaze strained upon that awful hole in the ice, through which the water splashed and gurgled; but where, alas, there was nothing *but* water.

Sir Romney's clasp tightened around her, but she did not feel it. Sir Romney's eyes wandered from her face to the hole, and back again; and on his own countenance there was a strange and ugly look, which, however, neither she nor any one else observed. In breathless silence the appalled group waited. For how long? Measured by Eva's sensations, an eternity. In reality, just twenty seconds. Then a joyous shout rent the air. Two heads had reappeared above the water!

The jaws of death had been cheated of their prey!

In the revulsion of feeling she experienced

after that horrible suspense, Eva turned to her father, and clung to him trembling and sobbing.

“Oh, papa! Thank God! Thank God!” she articulated convulsively, burying her face in his breast to shut out the scene of the terror she had endured.

Without echoing her thanksgiving for the safety of his son and his son’s brave preserver, Sir Romney strained his daughter closer and closer to his bosom, whilst he looked on mechanically at the efforts made by others to complete the deliverance which afforded him no satisfaction—which, on the contrary, had disappointed a murderous longing that, in view of his peril, had taken possession of him in regard to one of those young men.

Regaining, presently, the power of self-control which had well-nigh deserted her, Eva was struck by her father’s singular silence, and, at the same time, she seemed

intuitively to become sensible that his feelings were at variance with her own. Drawing back from his contact with a shudder, she glanced up into his face. Sir Romney had by this time, as he believed, brought his features under due command. Yet, uttering an ejaculation of dismay, Eva instantly broke from him, and ran towards the place where Alec was now being borne up the embankment. Although in a state of insensibility, he was, as the two captains who were carrying him, eagerly assured her, alive. His aspect, however, renewed all Eva's grief and horror, until, by feeling his heart, she had assured herself of the truth of this assertion. Then, kneeling beside him on the ground where he had been laid, she covered his wet face with kisses and chafed his cold hands, giving vent the while to inarticulate murmurs of joy and gratitude.

Meanwhile, awakening apparently to a

sense of what would be expected of him, Sir Romney flew to help in dragging Clive also out of the water. The task proved a somewhat difficult one, on account of the brittleness of the ice around the broken space, and because, moreover, through the intense cold of the water, the young man's limbs were becoming benumbed. But at length he, too, stood upon solid ground. Then, once more, an outcry of applause and congratulation hailed the noble hero. Everyone gathered round, eager to shake his hand, and to pour forth the praise he so well deserved.

"But now we must hurry home," broke in Captain Stamer, sensibly interrupting these proceedings. "We must get you out of those wet things as fast as possible, or there'll be the deuce to pay, after all, for this dipping."

"Ay, you come along with me, Willoughby," exclaimed Philip Wycombe, seizing

him by the arm ; ” you ’ ll be frozen to death if you don ’ t keep on the move . ”

Acquiescing in this suggestion, Clive set off in advance with his companion as quickly as the wet and clinging state of his attire would permit. The rest of the company followed with Alec, carried between his father and the two captains. Once on the way the young man opened his eyes, and made also a little moaning sound ; but almost immediately he again relapsed into insensibility.

On reaching the Hall, he was hurried into a hot bath, and thence to bed—a servant having, meanwhile, been dispatched for a doctor.


That Clive Willoughby would have stopped at the house, and undergone a similar treatment, all had expected. It was found, however, that he had insisted on going straight home to the Vicarage.

“ And a confoundedly foolish thing it

was to do!" opined young Wycombe, when he returned from escorting him thither. "Before he got there the poor fellow's teeth were chattering with the cold, and he was shaking all over like an aspen. I hope to goodness he'll be no worse for it, but it'll be astonishing if he isn't."

## CHAPTER XI.

### WAKING VISIONS.

NTIL he had reached home Alec had continued in a state of insensibility. But the mental stupefaction had resulted, in a great measure, from the benumbing influence of cold, and when warmth and effective circulation had been restored by means of the hot bath he revived. He had sustained, in fact, it soon became evident, no serious injury from his immersion. Yet, had that immersion continued but one minute longer, it must, of course have ended fatally. To this truth, as he lay quietly in bed, Alec became painfully alive. Having regained now full use of his faculties, he could realise the deadly

peril he had been in; and the thought of his hair-breadth escape naturally filled him with consternation. Unable to dismiss it from his mind, and dwelling upon it with increasing horror, he presently grew so agitated that the bed literally shook beneath him with his trembling, and huge drops of perspiration stood on his brow.

It was only from the presence of his sister that he seemed to derive any comfort or tranquility, and he insisted upon her sitting close beside him and holding his hand. There was something in her firm, warm clasp that imparted to him a sense of safety and protection.

And Eva was more than willing to sit beside the poor boy, to wipe his damp forehead, to grasp his quivering hand, and pour loving, reassuring words in his ear. To devote herself to his service in any way was a relief to her. For the truth was that she was filled with secret compunction and self-



reproach in his regard. She knew now that during those terrible moments of suspense, when her whole soul and senses focussed in the faculty of sight, she had watched that hole by which Clive Willoughby had disappeared under the treacherous ice, her sickening anxiety had not been upon *Alec's* account. The life of a comparative stranger had proved, in that supreme moment, to be dearer to her than that of her own brother. In Clive's danger she had lost sight of Alec's; and it was for Clive's safety rather than for his that her first cry of thanksgiving had gone up to heaven. Worse still, had she not even willed to prevent Clive from risking his own life at all to save that of her brother! She recollected how she had called out, "No, no, no!" when she had seen him preparing for the hazardous plunge. And now she felt as though she would gladly do anything to atone to Alec for what, in her present

reactionary state of feeling, seemed to have been shockingly unnatural and unsisterly conduct. Yet, how could she have helped what she had done? That cry had been involuntary. The passion of love, the agony of fear, which had taken such apparently sudden possession of her, and which beneath its invincible force had whelmed all other considerations, had been involuntary, too. And then *he*, also—ah, she would not allow herself to think just now of those words, of that glance, which, underlying all her self-condemnation and remorseful sentiment towards Alec, were ever present, as a delicious throbbing memory, deep down in her heart.

Having cleared the room by representing that, in his nervous excitement, she feared Alec would work himself up into a fever unless quietude were ensured, she remained with him alone. Then, retaining her hold of his hand, she set herself to try and

divert his thoughts from the dreadful experience he had undergone. Feeling all the while inclined to burst out weeping, and longing to throw herself on his bosom and beg his forgiveness for the disloyalty of affection with which she kept reproaching herself, she nevertheless chatted away to him incessantly; driving the tears back from her eyes, and, by main force of will, holding her own excited and overwrought feelings under restraint. Reminding him now of some event in their old Sandyford life, now of some incident that had occurred, or some person they had met during their travels abroad, but choosing only cheerful and amusing reminiscences—she ran on in a lively and unwearied flow of talk.

Under this treatment Alec gradually became calmer; and by the time they had partaken together of the nice little dinner which Eva had ordered to be served to them in the bedroom (declaring, with truth, that she

was thankful to have escaped the more formal one below), he was able to refer to the catastrophe of the afternoon without shaking from head to foot with horror. His uneasiness returned, however, every time it was suggested that Eva should join the company in the drawing-room, or that any one else proposed to take her place by his side. He would not suffer her to leave him for an instant, nor would Eva consent to do so ; and all evening (though it was the last of their stay for most of the guests) she remained a willing prisoner in his room.

“Promise to stay by me all night, Evy,” he entreated, after a visit from his father, which had left him almost as nervous and shaken as ever. “I shall not sleep a wink, I feel convinced ; and, by Jove ! I *daren’t* be left alone ! I really *daren’t* ! *Will* you stay with me ?”

“All night, Alec ? Yes, dear ; if you wish it, I will.”

“Oh, thanks! You’re a brick; you always were! You see, if I shut my eyes for a moment, it all comes back again!” he went on. “The plunge down into that dark cold water, and all the gasping and fright and horror of it! Oh, Eva, to think that in another moment I should have been drowned!” He shuddered violently.

“But you are *not* drowned, Alec. You are lying all safe on your comfortable bed, in a bright, warm room. Don’t think of it any more, my darling. Ah! perhaps that is the doctor, at last,” she added, in reference to a tap at the door.

It was the physician who had been summoned from Narrowtown several hours previously; but who, though he had promised the servant to come at once, had been unexpectedly detained upon the road. After a short professional examination, he declared that Alec had a capital constitution; and that, if he could only get a good

night's sleep, he would probably take no harm whatever from his involuntary bath. In order to ensure the desirable sleep, he promised to send him a soporific draught.

But even when he had taken the draught Alec would not release his sister from her promise to sit up with him ; and accordingly, despite the almost angry remonstrances of her father, she persisted in passing the night in his room. And all through the long hours Alec slept like a child, calm and motionless. She, on the contrary, sat by the fire, feeling no inclination to sleep.

Now, at last ! Now that she needed no longer to strain every effort to distract and amuse Alec ; now that all the house was still, she might *think*, she might allow herself to remember, she might face the strange, sweet truth she had learned. "Eva, my love ! my life ! My love ; my

life!" The words, ever since they had been uttered, had been ringing melodious changes in her innermost ear, though she had tried not to listen to them. Now, her hands clasped before her heaving breast, her eyes radiant with a soft light, her heart full of blissful emotion, she gave herself up to the rapturous music, and all it taught her. Clive Willoughby loved her. He loved her, *and she loved him!* She knew, now, that she had loved him from almost the first moment she had seen him; that for her, he was the one man in the world, her soul's complement and affinity, *her "love," her "life!"* or, at least, a portion of her life; the other existence which rounded and completed her own. Henceforth, and for ever, they did and must belong to each other. That thought transfigured her whole future, casting a halo of golden glory over the long, long vista of coming years. (Ah! at eighteen,

the vista of life does seem long ! Who can believe, then, that, “ we spend our days as a tale that is told ? ” )

She did not think, as she sat there by her brother's fire, as wide awake in these small hours of the night as though they had been the corresponding ones of the day, she did not think, in any definite manner, of marriage with Clive. That they should spend their future lives together, that some time they should be married, she took for granted ; but for the present it was sufficient happiness to love and be loved. Not once did it occur to her to consider whether Clive was rich or poor, eligible or ineligible. To her cousin Helena, who was not twelve months her senior, this would have been the first reflection. For years poor Helena had known that, when she married, it must be for a position and an establishment ; that love was to form no essential part of the question.



But Eva, fortunately, had never had her ideals of love and matrimony debased by mercenary considerations. In fact, she had never thought very much on the subject of love at all; and now it had come to her with all the freshness of novelty, the sweetness of purity, the dignity of a true and earnest passion. Upon one point only did she ponder with any anxiety. How would her father behave in regard to the matter? Would he approve of Clive's love? Would he receive him kindly? How, indeed, could it be otherwise? Did he not owe him a debt of gratitude which could never be paid? Had not Clive saved the life of his son—of his only son and heir? But for him, Alec at this moment, instead of lying on that canopied bed, breathing so gently and regularly, might have been still at the bottom of that frozen mere; *would* have been what she shivered to think of?

It is true that a very strange and shocking suspicion had seized upon her when she had broken away from Sir Romney at the lake; a suspicion suggested by his silence, and by something in his expression, namely, that he was *not glad* of his son's rescue. But she had quickly dismissed the notion as too dreadful to be true; she had managed to persuade herself that the disappointed scowl which she had surprised upon his face had had no existence outside her own excited imagination. It was impossible, utterly impossible, that he should have wished harm to poor, inoffensive Alec! He might not love him very dearly; but to desire his *death!* Eva thought that she must have been mad to have conceived such an idea. That it was *Clive*, not Alec, whom Sir Romney would willingly have left lying dead at the bottom of that ice-covered lake she never dreamt. So, happy in her ignorance, she told her-

self that her father must, perforce, like and admire her bright, brave, noble lover ; that, although hitherto it had evidently been disagreeable to him that she should receive attention from gentlemen at all, he would soon reconcile himself to her loving and being beloved by such a one as he. And to-morrow she would see him again ! He would come, she felt convinced, to repeat the avowal which, regardless of the presence of others, had escaped him in that awful moment when he had not felt sure he should ever see her face again. Yes ! to-morrow he would whisper those delicious words in her private ear which he had called aloud in his extremity ; and then he should know that she loved him. Picturing to herself all the details, the words, the looks, the tones of that anticipated interview, and wondering what she had done that she should deserve to be so happy, Eva sat dreaming the silent hours

away in blissful waking visions, whilst the rest of the household slumbered around her. Would those pleasant visions have any counterpart in reality? Did the unknown future hold for Evelyn Northbrooke all the happiness she so fondly fancied?

## CHAPTER XII.

### SOME SERIOUS NEWS.

**I**T was broad daylight, eight o'clock of that winter's morning, before Alec Northbrooke, disturbed by voices at his bedside, sleepily opened his eyes.

"Well, my boy, and how do you feel now?"

"How do I feel?" echoed Alec, regarding the questioner in startled surprise.

It was his father, who had come from his own room in slippers and dressing-gown. "Oh, I forgot! Why, I'm as right as a trivet."

"Ah! That's well. Perhaps, then, you can spare you sister now. *She* does not look as right as a trivet, poor child."

"By Jove!" exclaimed the young man, sitting up. "I am so sorry, Eva. Have you really been here all night?"

"Of course I have, Alec. Did I not give you my promise?"

"Dear me! I was a bear to let you do it. But, by Jove, you know, I really did feel so horribly nervous and upset last night. Are you very tired, Eva?"

"Yes, I do feel rather tired, certainly."

"Tired! She's thoroughly worn out. She is as pale as a ghost!" protested Sir Romney, in indignant accents. "Go to bed now, my child. Go straight to bed, little one."

"Thank you, I will."

"But take something to eat first," continued her father; "don't neglect that, Eva, or you will not rest well in your present exhausted condition."

"Very well, papa; I will have some breakfast in my room. Good-bye, Alec,"

she murmured, stooping to kiss him. "Oh, how glad, how thankful I am, my own brother, to feel that you are safe and well!"

. . . . .

The short winter day had slipped away. Darkness was again stealing over the earth when Eva awoke from the long, unbroken sleep which had fallen upon her as a consequence of utter physical and mental prostration. For a few moments she lay only half-conscious, letting her glance wander round the luxuriously-appointed chamber, where the ruddy firelight flickered and danced on mirror and picture.

Then recollection returned, and she uttered a sharp ejaculation of dismay. On seeking her couch, in obedience to her father's behest, she had intended merely to have rested until luncheon time. But lo, she had slept, also, the whole afternoon! The whole of *this* afternoon, wherein she

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had felt so sure of seeing Clive Willoughby! Had he called? Of course he had. And he had gone away disappointed. Eva was almost disposed to cry at the thought, until she reflected that, under the circumstances, Clive would not be likely to stand upon ceremony with regard to the times of his visits. "He will call again this evening. Or, perhaps, he will have stayed to dinner. Oh, yes! Papa will have been certain to have asked him to dinner," she said to herself, her heart beginning to palpitate with delight at the conviction that, even at this moment, her brother's preserver, her own lover, was beneath the same roof with her.

"Ah, mademoiselle, you wake then at last?" The speaker was Eva's French maid, who had just entered the room on tip-toe. "You have had a nice sleep, is it not?"

"Rather too long a one," laughed her mistress. "What time is it, Marie?"



“It is five o'clock, mademoiselle. Shall I now light the lamps?”

“Yes, I must get up at once. I am quite ashamed of my laziness,” she answered, suiting the action to the word. “Marie, do you know, did you hear, whether there were any visitors to dinner?” she demanded presently.

“But, no, mademoiselle, I hear of nobody. Ah, pardon! I did forget the letter. Sir Romney would not permit that mademoiselle was disturbed for the ladies to make their adieus, so Mees Northbrooke leef me this letter to give mademoiselle. And the gentlemen, also, the two capetanes, they did go this afternoon, about one hour since.”

“Oh! But Mr. Wycombe, I suppose, is here still? He was not intending to leave until to-morrow?”

“But, yes, he remains. What dress will mademoiselle wear?”

Eva reflected for a moment. "My dove-coloured silk, I think."

"Ah, yes! That is the sweet robe. It becomes mademoiselle better than any of her robes," commented the maid.

"Marie, are you quite sure there is no one below? I thought that—that Mr. Willoughby might, perhaps, be here?"

"The good gentleman, so courageous, so brave, that did save Monsieur Aleek out of the water? Ah, mon Dieu! Mademoiselle, no. The doctor suffers that he stays in bed—to-day—to-morrow—perhaps longer still. He has cold—what do you say?—very bad cold on the longs."

Except by a faint, inarticulate exclamation, Eva made no reply to this information. Presently, however, observing that she was cold, she crept nearer to the fire.

"Yes, indeed, I did feel mademoiselle sheever," rejoined the maid, making a vigorous application of the poker. "Voila,

seet here. I finish your hair here, made-moiselle."

But even close to the fire, with her hands stretched out to catch the blaze, Eva shivered again. Yet the room was warm, and a few moments before she had felt it so. The physical sensation of cold was the result of the mental shock she had received. A blow had fallen upon her—a blank, bitter disappointment! A sharp constriction of the heart—a miserable, wild presentiment of evil, had turned her sick and chill. Clive was ill! Ill and confined to bed! Strange to say, she had never thought of such a contingency. Alec had been under the water three times as long as he, and yet had escaped unharmed. Why, then, should Clive suffer? The news was as unexpected as it was distressing. And was it *only* a cold that he had? Or might not the illness prove serious—perhaps even fatal? Into this terrible form the poor girl's forebodings

rapidly shaped themselves. She strove, however, to shake off such unhappy fears—telling herself that they were unreasonable, ridiculous, utterly without foundation.

“How did you hear, Marie, that Mr. Willoughby was ill?” she asked, after a while.

Marie explained that she had gained her information through the footman who had waited at the luncheon table, where Clive’s illness had been discussed. “It is cold on the longs—a leetle inflamate, as you say. But in two or three days the young monsieur will find himself, no doubt, all well. Now, mademoiselle, permit, if you please, that I put on your dress?”

“No, Marie. I think, after all, I won’t wear that dress.”

“Plait il?”

“I will wear my black tulle dress.”

“Oh, but mademoiselle has worn that dress so much, so many times,” remonstrated the maid. “Mon Dieu, I did think she was

of another sort ; but they are all alike, *ces demoiselles*—chop and change the mind—now this way, now that—one knows not why,” she muttered to herself, as, in obedience to a repeated command from her young mistress, she replaced the dove-coloured silk in the wardrobe and exchanged it for the plainer dress.

Half an hour later, having argued herself out of the nervous alarm which had followed upon the first shock of those unlooked-for tidings, and recovered her spirits, or at least, her hopefulness, with the ready optimism of youth, Eva left her room. In the fact of doing so she encountered her brother.

“Hello, Eva! I was just coming to see if you ever intended to get up again. By Jove, you’ve been making a day of it!”

“Yes, I have slept longer than I wished to do. But, Alec, you looked flushed ; are you not feeling well, dear?”

“Oh, yes, I’m all right, thanks. But I have some news for you, which I fancy will rather surprise you. Come to my snugery, Eva, where we shan’t be interrupted. You are all right yourself, are you not?” he asked, as an evident afterthought.

Eva declared that she was in perfect health, and quite rested.

“You are going to tell me about poor Mr. Willoughby being ill, I suppose, Alec,” she remarked, on reaching the room to which he had invited her; “I know it already.”

“No. I’m awfully sorry about his cold, by Jove. But *that’s* not my news. Come, try to guess it?”

“It is not anything very serious, is it, Alec?”

“It’s uncommonly serious, I should say.”

“Oh, Alec! How do you know? Who says so? Does the doctor say so?”

"The doctor? What on earth are you talking about, Eva?"

"Does the doctor think his illness serious? Oh, Alec, do tell me!"

"Dear me! Eva, how stupid you are!" exclaimed her brother. "Did I not tell you it wasn't that? Willoughby has got a bad cold; and, of course, I'm very much cut up about it, since it was through me he took it. "But he will be all right, I expect, in a day or two. I should be miserable if I didn't think so."

"I am sure you would, Alec. Then it is not inflammation?"

"Well, Mrs. Dalziel said there *was* a little inflammation of the air tubes. But it is only a slight attack. He will get over it directly."

"Oh, indeed, I hope so!"

"I shall run down to the Vicarage myself this evening, to ask again how he is," continued Alec. "If I thought he was

going to be dangerously ill I should go frantic. But what's the use of conjuring up imaginary evils, and making one's self anxious without a cause? Well, now, are you going to guess my news?"

"Alec! My dear boy, I think I *can* guess it! Is it—is it about Helena?"

Alec bridled and blushed. "Yes, it is about Lady Helena," he said. "Eva, I am engaged to her."

"You are engaged to her? Actually engaged?"

"I am actually engaged," repeated the young man, putting on an air of extreme importance, and pulling at the corners of his dawning moustache. "I proposed to Lady Helena St. Aubyn this afternoon, and was accepted."



## CHAPTER XIII.

### IS IT LOVE?

**F**OR a brief space Eva made no rejoinder. She gazed at her brother with a troubled, questioning look. Did he really love his cousin? Did Helena love him? She had noticed how, all along, they had shown a partiality for each other's society, and, of late, she had begun to wonder whether it were possible that a serious attachment could be springing up between them. More than once her aunt had dropped vague hints that such was the case, and many signs and tokens had appeared to point that way. Yet, to Eva, the whole thing had seemed an inexplicable puzzle. Of

all people, she would least have suspected these two of being in any way *en rapport*. In every respect—character, education, disposition—how diverse they were! Helena, quiet and self-contained in manner, refined in taste, an accomplished musician and artist, well versed in philosophy and the physical sciences, a first-rate mathematician, capable of working out profound problems in differential and integral calculi. Alec, buoyant and demonstrative in temperament, troubled by no sense of the responsibilities of life, less educated by far than his own valet, incapable of reading, or at any rate of enjoying, even a newspaper, and alas, vain and conceited in proportion to his ignorance! How could the pair assimilate? What interest could they have in common? What possible bond of union could exist between them? Nevertheless, at times, Eva had been

almost forced to conclude that some inscrutable affinity or mysterious sympathy did draw them together. How else could she account for Alec's marked attentions, and for the fact that Helena, even if she did not encourage, certainly did not repulse those attentions. The key to the difficulty was missing to Eva. She had never, it must be remembered, received a proper conventional education with reference to the relations between the sexes. She had never been taught the correct science of matrimony; and she was too young, too innocent, too pure-minded to have acquired even the rudiments of it by instinct.

Accordingly, it never occurred to her that her cousin, "moulded in the fashion of these times," regarded the question of marriage as one quite apart from love—as a matter simply of weights and measures—or, rather, that it was so regarded for her, and that she had

acquiesced, recognising the expediency and propriety of the view. In her innocent inexperience, moreover, she never divined the share that Lady St. Aubyn had taken in the matter, nor saw how poor Alec's vanity and weakness had been worked upon to bring him to the point.

So, though astonished and perplexed at the courtship which had been going on beneath her eyes, Eva had attributed it to some curious and incomprehensible mutual attraction. Yet, when Alec now informed her of his engagement, with an ostentatious coolness of manner belied by the flush of excitement on his boyish face, an uneasy doubt obtruded itself. Was it possible that two such utterly uncongenial souls could *love*? Had they not mistaken a passing fancy, a feeling of friendship or liking, for the warmer emotion? Since yesterday she had herself

undergone an *éclaircissement* on the subject of love. She had seen the master-passion depicted, in all its fervour, on Clive Willoughby's face ; she had heard it ring in the tones of his voice, as he addressed to her those impassioned words before taking his heroic plunge beneath the ice. And, furthermore, she had herself felt the divine delirium. For hours, last night, she had abandoned herself to the swift-rushing current of delight which had carried her out into an ocean of almost unimaginable bliss. The world forgotten, sweet music in her ears, effulgent light all around, a golden mist of unexplored joys closing in the horizon on every side, she had floated in her paradise of dreams. She knew now what love meant—love that was ecstasy—love that was deeply satisfied with its object ; true, pure, real love—the uncalculating, heaven-born passion

In the light of her wider experience of this wonderful new revelation she now studied her brother's face, searching for evidence of a like tender emotion to that which throbbed within her own gentle breast.

"Well, have you nothing to say?" inquired Alec, in a peevish tone. "Upon my word, you are a nice sister! A fellow tells you that he is engaged to be married, and you sit there looking as glum as though he had said he was going to die. Don't you like her, Eva?"

"Indeed, I do. I like her exceedingly, Alec. But are you sure—excuse me, dear Alec—are you sure you will suit each other?"

"Suit each other? Of course we shall; why not? By Jove, these are pretty congratulations!" said Alec, blustering to cover the secret disquietude which his sister's inquiry stimulated.

Eva, however, took no notice of his petulance.

"And you really, *really* love her, Alec?"

"To be sure I love her," he answered. "And, at any rate, there is one thing certain? *she* loves *me*. Her mother swears she does."

"Her mother?" repeated Eva, in astonishment.

"Yes, she vows and declares it. And yet, do you know, when I spoke to Helena, she did not *seem* so particularly delighted. In fact, she—she actually cried! Curious, wasn't it? She said, 'yes;' you understand; and she let me kiss her, and all that; and then, all at once, she burst into tears and ran out of the room."

"Oh!" said Eva, with an expression of bewilderment.

"I was rather dumbfounded at first, and vexed too, you may be sure," con-

tinued her brother, "but I thought afterwards that it was because she was excited and upset a little. I always feel inclined to cry myself when I'm excited. But, of course, she *was* glad; she *must* have been, you know."

"Yes, if she loved you, Alec."

"And she does love me. Upon my word, you seem to doubt it! You're very complimentary, by Jove. I'm not a bad-looking fellow; and there's nothing so very extraordinary in a girl's falling in love with me, as far as I see—especially one that's so ug—I mean, plain herself."

Eva kept silence.

"At any rate, that's been the way of it," he went on, pulling again at his moustache. "I've known all along that she was fond of me; though, certainly, I *did* think she flirted a bit with that fellow Wycombe. But that was all non-



sense, it turns out. Aunt Muriel thinks that he is madly in love with her; but she was quite shocked that I should have suspected Helena of encouraging him—a man that doesn't know, she says, who his own grandfather was! However, until this morning I really didn't think she cared *quite* so much for me as she does."

"Oh, I'm so glad you feel sure of that, Alec!"

"Yes," he resumed, with a conceited little laugh. "She couldn't sleep last night for a moment, it appears, for thinking of the danger I'd been in. Aunt Muriel came into my room this morning before I was up (for the governor thought I'd better stay in bed till luncheon time), and she told me all about it. I mustn't repeat everything, of course, but the long and the short of it is that poor Helena would have been tremendously unhappy if I hadn't returned her affection.

And I'm as pleased as possible about it, you know. Fancy my marrying the daughter of a marquis! Upon my word, it makes a fellow feel proud. And it is nice to have people liking you so much as all this, isn't it, now?"

"Yes. But, Alec, the sweetness of love is in loving, even more than in being beloved, I think. You *do* love Helena, don't you?"

"Of course; I said so before, didn't I? Good gracious, Eva, how sentimental you are! This is quite a new feature in your character. And it's quite tiresome of you to keep harping so on the one string. I don't pretend to be so *very* desperate about her, if you must know the truth. But hot, romantic love is not the best kind."

"No," rejoined Eva, brightening, "and I have no doubt the love will grow. Alec, how well it is," she subjoined, with

some hesitancy, "that you came to that understanding with Jessie Bennett!"

Alec's face suddenly changed. "What understanding?" he retorted, sharply. "Poor Jessie! poor little Jessie! Whatever am I to say to——Eva, I think you are very unkind. Why should you remind me of Jessie just now? You are very unkind," he repeated, his lips quivering.

Whilst making her last remark, Eva had risen with the intention of offering the congratulatory kiss which she had not yet bestowed; but she now sank back into her chair, and regarded her brother in dismayed surprise, as he made an effort to conquer his facile emotion.

"Alec, I don't understand!" she exclaimed, at length. "You cannot, of course, care for Jessie still—but you puzzle me, Alec!"

"And so do you puzzle me, very often, Eva, and vex me too;" he snapped. "I

know you are very good and kind, and very sensible, too, as a rule ; but, somehow, you don't always seem to see things in a proper light. And this afternoon you really have been most unsympathetic. Instead of congratulating me, as I expected, and feeling proud and pleased at the idea of my marrying a girl of such high rank, you have done nothing but talk sentimental twaddle, and try to dash my spirits in every way you could. You see, Eva, you have no ambition," he went on, arguing himself into a different frame of mind, " no proper pride. In fact, you never had. *You* were quite contented with that horrid, low life of ours in Sandyford, whilst I, you know, was always aspiring after something better, and making efforts to attain it, too. By the way," he added, laughing, " how little my lady, the Marchioness of St. Aubyn, thought, when she declined to answer those letters of mine, that some day she would almost as good as ask

me to marry her daughter! By Jove, things do sometimes turn out amazingly queer in this world of ours; don't they, Eva?"

Eva smiled—a smile of relief, not unmingled with contempt. Plainly Alec was not suffering, nor in any danger of suffering, from deep feeling of any description. What a butterfly he was! How he flitted from subject to subject in his thoughts and speech! How he changed, like an April day, from sunshine to shower, from mood to mood! How like a spoiled, impetuous child he was! Yet, like a child, he was easily guided by a firm hand, and he had a child's frank, forgiving, unmalicious disposition. To Eva, despite his faults, he was very dear. Between natures so profoundly unreciprocal, however, there could be no equality of companionship or true union of heart. Her affection for him was more like that of a mother—protective, ready to make excuses and allowances—than of a sister,

and a younger sister. At the present moment, realising more fully, perhaps, than she had ever done before, the vapid shallowness of his character, she was moved towards him with a sorrowful disdain; and again the doubt forcibly obtruded itself. Could it indeed be true that her cousin Helena, with all her gifts of mind and force of character, really loved this childish boy!

"By Jove, Eva, how you do stare at a fellow with those great eyes of yours!" resumed the poor youth, moving uneasily beneath her earnest gaze. "And you are precious cool about this matter, I must say, considering how important it is! You have not even asked how the governor takes it."

"No, but I have been thinking about that, Alec. I don't see how our father can offer any objections. He has not done so, has he, dear?"

"Well, I don't know; I hope not; Aunt Muriel seemed to feel convinced that he

wouldn't. But I haven't heard yet. She had just gone to speak to him when I came up to you. You see, I felt rather nervous about mentioning the matter to him myself, and her ladyship kindly offered to do so for me. She'll manage the business better than I should have done. But I'm getting rather anxious now to know what he says. I'll run down and see if the interview is over. And, by the way, I must tell Wycombe. Won't he be jealous? By Jove, I really do believe he had the impudence to think of Lady Helena himself—a man without a grandfather!”

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A STRAW OF COMFORT.

**L**ADY ST. AUBYN had inferred, upon what seemed to her substantial premises, that her brother would not oppose himself to the match which she had been so instrumental in promoting; and in this conclusion she proved correct. So far from objecting to an engagement between the cousins, Sir Romney at once ratified it by a hearty—indeed eager—sanction.

He urged, moreover, that the marriage should take place at as early a date as possible, and he promised to act towards the young couple with extreme generosity. Bevel Grange, he agreed, should be given to them as a residence, together with a most



liberal allowance for keeping it up. Furthermore, a handsome marriage settlement should be made upon Helena. All this was arranged between the two parents at their first interview ; and it must be owned that the Marchioness was both surprised and overjoyed at the munificence of Sir Romney's proposals. She had anticipated acquiescence on his part, and had believed that he would make a suitable provision for his son ; but she had not expected such free-handed liberality as he displayed.

With regard to an early marriage, her ladyship's wishes were in perfect accord with those of her brother. The point, in fact, was one upon which she was specially anxious. Could Helena's nuptials take place before those of her brother, the young Marquis, all the difficulties and disagreeablenesses which their mother had foreseen would be obviated. Brandreth Towers might then be abandoned without regret to its

rightful inheritor and the wife of whom Lady St. Aubyn did not approve, and she herself would find a home, in accordance with Sir Romney's own suggestion, with her daughter at Bevel Grange. Never were the preliminaries of a wedding settled more amicably, or with more mutual satisfaction, between the heads of the families concerned, than in the present instance.

Very distinctly, however, did each of the heads in question apprehend the motives which governed the other in desiring the alliance. That Sir Romney Northbrooke disliked his son Lady St. Aubyn had discovered within a few hours of her arrival at the hall, and it had soon become plain to her that he would do much, even sacrifice much, to be rid of Alec's constant presence beneath the same roof with himself. Sir Romney, on the other hand, perfectly understood that his sister was wishful to secure a husband for her plain and almost portion-

less daughter. The perception of her design had, it is true, been somewhat slow in dawning upon him ; but since it had done so he had watched with amused gratification her efforts to accomplish it. He had noted how she had worked upon the vanity and other foibles of his "unlicked cub" (as he was in the habit of sometimes styling Alec, to the young man's excessive indignation), and how she had gradually gained ascendancy over his weak mind, and thus in the end managed to reduce him to her purpose. When she came to him, therefore, on her delicate mission as Alec's ambassador, he had exhibited no surprise, and had been ready with the gracious answer she had received. Scarcely even had he allowed himself to sneer at Alec for not having had the courage to plead his own cause in person. And when after the interview he met his son, he astonished him by the warmth of his congratulations, and still more so by

patting him upon the back, and declaring that he was a sensible young fellow, and that both by his resolution to marry and his choice of a wife he had raised himself many degrees in his estimation. For days afterwards, also, Sir Romney treated his son with unwonted consideration, and ceased almost entirely to make him the butt of his cynical and satirical observations. Lady St. Aubyn behaved towards him likewise with marked courtesy ; and, puffed up with dignity and pleased with the novelty of his position as an engaged man, Alec appeared on the whole to be contented and happy, though there were times when a cloud of fretful uneasiness seemed to pass over his spirits.

As for Lady Helena, Eva, who studied her closely, could not tell whether she were happy or unhappy. And, in point of fact, the girl was neither the one nor the other. The pros and cons in regard to her

change of prospects were so evenly balanced in her mind as to induce a state of comparative indifference. On the one hand, she did not, it need scarcely be said, love her affianced husband, as the poor boy so fondly imagined; but neither, on the other, did she, excepting at odd moments, absolutely detest him. Not loving him, she certainly did not desire to marry him; but, owing to evil training, and a natural deficiency of conscientiousness, she failed apparently to understand how wicked would be the act. Again, though not mercenary in disposition, she appreciated to the full the advantages of affluence and the discomforts of poverty, the choice between which hung by this marriage. Still more, her mother wished it; and obedience to her mother had become with Helena a second nature. Her own will was strong, but her mother's was infinitely stronger, and in opposing her she would have, also, the force of long habit to

contend against. And why should she think of contending?

Any marriage would be objectionable to her so long as she cherished that unfortunate secret attachment of hers—but this, she had persuaded herself, would be no more objectionable than another—whereas, the alternative of rejecting it would, in all probability, be old-maidenhood and consequent impecuniosity.

Once more, another vital point on the affirmative side of the question was presented by the fact that marriage with her cousin would provide a home for her mother as well as herself. Alec had agreed that Lady St. Aubyn should live with them; and Lady St. Aubyn had promised her daughter that she would take all management of domestic affairs (for which Helena had a strong distaste) off her hands, as also, so far as she could, the encumbrance of her husband, thus leaving Helena free to

pursue the studies whereof she was so fond.

Reconciled, then, by these terms of the bargain, Helena viewed the matter with tolerable equanimity, and contrived not to betray the true state of her sentiments towards Alec. If, however, the illusion as to her passionate affection (which illusion Helena herself had had little share in producing) were to be kept up, Lady St. Aubyn saw that it would not do to protract their stay at the Hall much longer.

Accordingly she presently made arrangements for their departure.

It was the day before that fixed for their return to Brandreth Towers (exactly a week from that upon which the accident at the lake had occurred), and Helena and Eva were spending the afternoon together alone. A miserable afternoon it was, the sky one unbroken expanse of cheerless grey, the wind cold and penetrating, and the rain,

which had been threatening all day, beginning at length to fall in an uncomfortable drizzle. For nearly an hour the cousins had not exchanged a syllable. Helena, seated by the fire, with her seat on the fender-stool, held a book in her hand. It was one which interested her greatly, but in which she could not become absorbed, because of the disturbing sense of a motionless figure gazing from a window at the other end of the room.

Eva had her back to her, but Helena pictured to herself the expression upon her face—an expression of pain and distress which called forth sympathetic feeling on her own part, to which, however, she could not venture to give utterance.

Since her engagement with Alec, a wall of reserve seemed to have sprung up betwixt his sister and herself. Eva was the one person in whose presence she felt ashamed of her mother's successful manœuvring, and



of her own complicity in the scheming. When Eva had first offered her an affectionate welcome as her future sister-in-law, Helena had found herself shrinking, just as Alec had done, before the gaze of those pure, truthful eyes, which seemed as though they could pierce beneath outward deceptions and discern the real and unworthy motives of her conduct. She had, however, put on an air of cold dignity, which had effectually kept her cousin at arm's length, and prevented her from making any attempt to gain her confidence. And for the last few days poor Eva had had little thought or anxiety to spare on behalf of others. Troubles and solitudes of her own engrossed her—filling her mind and heart to the exclusion of all else. For the moment, she had become almost selfishly self-absorbed. Who, in the midst of a pressing crisis in his own individual life, can find time for the concerns of his neighbours? When the cup of an un-

expected joy is first presented to the lips ; when the spirit lies crushed and bleeding beneath the sharp stroke of adversity, or the mind is torn and racked with suspense on personal matters, who can realise that the affairs of others may be of equal moment with one's own ? At such crucial periods the altruism of the best of us is apt to get buried beneath a weight of superincumbent egotism. Sympathy is a plant which does not flourish well in a pre-occupied heart. For the time being, Evelyn Northbrooke's interest in the love concerns of her brother and cousin, if not exactly lost, was, at any rate, overwhelmed by deeper interests of her own.

Clive Willoughby was ill, seriously ill ! The attack of inflammation of the lungs, from which he had at first suffered, had been in some measure conquered, but rheumatic fever of a violent character had since set in.

This morning, when Alec and she had

called at the Vicarage to make inquiries, they had been told that the physician considered his symptoms alarming. Fanny had been their informant; and the poor girl, whose love for her brother amounted to passion, had betrayed by her manner that she could scarcely endure the sight of Alec — Alec sitting there in robust health, whilst in the room above, her beloved Clive, who had imperilled his life for his sake, lay tossing upon a bed of pain and sickness! a bed which might possibly prove to be a bed of death! It was only at the spectacle of the young man's sincere distress, and because she discerned, in some faint degree, the anguish which Eva was enduring, that she controlled vocal expression of the irritation and resentment wherewith she felt inspired against him.

Alec, however, had perceived her antipathetical feeling, and, always sensitive to the opinions of others about himself, the know-

ledge of its existence had added to his unhappiness about Clive. For he really had been very unhappy since learning of the danger of his heroic preserver. All day trouble had sat upon his boyish countenance. At luncheon, he had eaten nothing, though Eva had noticed with uneasiness that he drank a great deal; and he had since gone off for a long and solitary ride, with the object, as he had declared, of driving away the "blue-devils." Sir Romney Northbrooke was also out upon horseback. He had gone to call upon Mr. Carrington, and had promised, on his way home, to stop at the Vicarage and bring tidings as to the invalid's present condition. It was for his return that Eva had been watching so anxiously at the window. The apartment which she now occupied with her cousin was a morning room to the front of the house, and from its windows she could command a considerable portion of the avenue by which he could

approach. Poor girl! how sad were her thoughts as she stood there looking out on the dreary winter prospect and the drizzling rain!

Only a week ago, and life had seemed to her so fair, so sweet! Now, how changed was everything! The fairy palace of her dreams had collapsed, shaken to pieces by a rude convulsion of nature. It lay around her in ruins of broken walls and bare rafters. The golden glory which had enshrouded her future life had turned to spectral mist.

Sunshine had given place to heavy, overhanging gloom. Summer, with its balmy breath and flowers, had been exchanged, without transition, for bleak and stormy winter. She had been so sure of her lover, so satisfied of his love! Those passionate words of his, that love-avowal which had broken from him at so strange a time and place, had gone straight to her heart, and had kindled there a swift responsive flame,

one which she felt would be undying, unquenchable. It had seemed so impossible, during those first brief blissful hours, that her love could be other than a happy love. Her lover fulfilled her ideal of all that was grand, and noble, and generous. He awoke in her a perfect faith and trust. Her pure soul found in his an answering purity. She *approved* of him with a glad, unhesitating approval.

They suited each other, she felt, to every fibre of their beings. Yet, behold, a cruel fate had risen up, threatening to tear them asunder, even before they had felt the sweets of unity! Clive was ill! Clive might die! She might never see him again! Might never again hear his voice or listen to a repetition of that impassioned confession! The thought was appalling. She shrank from it with consternation and dismay, yet she could not shut it out. It forced itself upon her with terrible persistency, turning

her sick and cold a hundred times an hour. What was she to do if all the possibilities of her life were thus to be ruthlessly brought to an end? What an irony of fate would it be if he were to die now! if, Tantalus-like, the waters of bliss had been suffered to rise to her lips only to sink away as she stooped to taste them! Surely it couldn't, couldn't be. Her young nature rose up in protestation against such loss, such bitter, cruel loss. She had possessed her treasures so short a time, but it was more to her already than the whole world besides. Was it to be riven from her thus? Impossible! So dreadful a thing could never be. Crushed and bleeding, Hope rose again to battle with grim Fear and wild Despair. Her father might bring news of some improvement in the symptoms; the alarm of the morning might prove a false one. She watched for his coming as a sick man watches for day-break; she longed for even a shadow of

better tidings as a hungry man longs for food.

“Are you not cold, Eva?” inquired Lady Helena, breaking, at last, the long silence.

Eva started. She had forgotten her cousin’s presence. “Oh, I beg your pardon,” she exclaimed, mechanically, turning upon her a white, drawn face and wistful eyes full of unshed tears. “What did you say?”

“Do come to the fire, darling,” urged Helena, using an endearment which she had never employed towards her cousin before, and longing to comfort her, yet feeling that she could not break down the bar which she had herself erected against their intimacy.

“Thank you,” answered Eva. “Yes, it is cold. I have been looking for papa,” she added, trying to smile, “but I suppose he will not come while I stand here. ‘A



watched pot never boils'—you know that elegant proverb?"

"No. Your hands are like stone, dear!"

"Are they? Well, I will warm them," she replied, kneeling on the hearthrug, and making a pitiful attempt at cheerfulness. "Aunt has not come down yet, I see?"

"No. I expect she is taking a long siesta this dull afternoon. Does it rain yet, Eva?"

"I don't know; yes, I think so. Ha! listen, there are horse's hoofs," she went on, returning to the window. "Yes, it is papa at last!"

"At last? I should say he had been remarkably quick, if he has called at Mr. Carrington's and at the Vicarage, too," said her cousin.

"Oh! I *hope* he has not forgotten to call there!" cried Eva, with a tremor of dis-

appointment in her tone ; and dropping into a chair, she sat, with her clasped hands, trying to still her impatience, as she waited for her father's appearance.

Sir Romney was not long in entering the room, which he did with a brisk step and animated air. Throughout the past week the baronet had been unusually gentle and sweet-tempered to every one about him. To-day his amiability had reached its climax.

"You have had a wet ride, Uncle Romney," said Helena, in return to a few pleasant words of greeting. "Eva, shall I ring the bell for tea?"

"Thanks, if you will. Papa," the words were brought out with an evident effort, "you went to the Vicarage, did you not?"

"Yes, my dear ; at least I went to the door. But I met the doctor coming out, so I made my inquiries from him."

“Oh, papa, what did he say? Is there hope? Will he get better?”

For a moment Sir Romney's face changed like that of one who experiences a sharp twinge of pain. Then, rubbing his hands together over the blaze, he answered in a sprightly tone, “Better, little one? to be sure he will get better! We won't believe anything else. As the doctor says—what is his name—Whitby? Yes, as Dr. Whitby says, he has a capital physique, and he is young. He will throw off the illness directly, there can be no doubt of it.”

Sir Romney arranged his spectacles as he spoke, taking care not to turn towards his daughter. It was not easy to face Eva's luminous eyes whilst telling her a direct falsehood, and to Sir Romney, himself, what he said was a falsehood.

He did not believe that Clive Willoughby would recover, neither had Dr. Whitby

given him reason to suppose so. On the contrary, he had shaken his head with prophetic gravity, and had observed that the case was a very serious one.

The young man had now become delirious, and the doctor was going to send out a professional nurse on his return to Narrowtown. It was true, however, that he had added, as he stepped into his carriage, after bidding Sir Romney good-bye at the Vicarage gate: "Of course, while there is life there is hope; and he is young, you know; that is in his favour."

Ready to catch at straws of comfort, and eager, like the rest of her fellow-mortals, to believe what she most desired, Eva felt her spirits lightened by her father's favourable report and confident manner. The colour came back to her pale face, and by the time tea had been brought in and the lamps lighted, and Lady St. Aubyn had descended, refreshed by her nap, and

Alec had returned from his ride, she was able to join in the general conversation that ensued.

The subject of Clive's illness was avoided by tacit consent. Alec, who, as a matter of course, had by this time cast of much of his disquietude, was full of the journey which was to take place on the morrow, and in which he was to share, for it had been arranged that he was to accompany his aunt and cousin to Dorset. He was intending, however, to stay only one night at Brandreth Towers, and to return on the following day. To remain longer from home under the circumstances, in regard to young Willoughby, would, he had had the grace to declare, be impossible. The talk was still flowing lightly, when a footman entered with a small sealed note on a silver salver. Presenting it to his master, he informed him that a "person," he did not "think she was a *lady*," in a

very thick veil, had asked to see him, and had sent up the note. After a glance at the address, Sir Romney turned his back upon his companions and tore open the note. It contained two lines of writing. "Where have you put the—the person?" he demanded. The footman explained that he had left her in the hall. "Then show her into the library; I will follow immediately."

"Who is it, sir?" asked Alec.

"Oh, some one begging, I fancy, for a charitable object," replied his father, carelessly; "I will explain when I return."

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE VEILED VISITOR.

**B**ROOKE Hall was not provided with gas, and the one lamp which burned on the library table shed a very sombre light over the huge apartment.

“Shall I bring in another lamp, Sir Romney?” asked the footman, holding open the door for his master, and throwing back an inquisitive glance at the lady in the thick veil whom he had just shown into the room.

“No,” was the brusque reply, “you can take yourself off.” And closing the door, Sir Romney stood by it for a few seconds, listening to the man’s retreating footsteps. Then, advancing towards the lady, who had risen from her seat, he exclaimed, abruptly :

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"For God's sake, Emily, why did you come here?"

"Because, if I had *not* come, I should have gone mad." As she made this somewhat startling rejoinder the lady threw back her veil, and raised to her questioner a countenance haggard and wild-eyed.

"My poor girl! You have been ill?"

"No, no, not ill. But oh, so wretched! So terrified!"

"Terrified? Why have you been terrified?" demanded Sir Romney, half-angrily, half-soothingly. "There is no danger of any kind, not the slightest danger."

"Oh, are you sure? Are you quite sure?"

"Perfectly sure. But you really should not have come here! It was very foolish."

"Why, who can know? And in this close veil! Oh, Carleton, I was obliged to come. I wanted to see if you were safe. I couldn't bear it—I was going mad!"

"Hush, hush! I had no idea you were so



nervous, Emily. I wish to heaven I had never told you anything, since it affects you like this."

I *am* nervous, yes. Since I went to live in those apartments by myself I have scarcely eaten or slept. All night I have been awake, fancying horrible things—fancying policemen coming here to seize you, Carleton, and to drag you off in handcuffs to prison! Picturing to myself a trial—a dreadful public trial! and you in the prisoner's dock, you, my own dear brother, of whom I used to feel so proud! And then, the sentence—penal servitude for life! Oh, Carleton! it would be penal servitude for life!"

"No, by Heaven! It should never come to that. At the first threatening of exposure or discovery I am prepared with a means of escape. Depend upon it, I shall never stand in a felon's dock!"

"Oh, Carleton! What—what do you mean?" stammered the lady, laying a trem-

bling hand on his arm. "You don't mean——? You can't mean——?"

"No, no, never mind what I mean; the remark was a foolish one," interposed her companion, hastily. "Emily, stand up, and try to calm yourself. If you should faint, recollect, it might entail serious consequences."

"I shall not faint; I never do. But you looked so strange, Carleton, you frightened me. There, I am quite composed. And now that I see you safe my head feels better. Oh, if you only knew what I have suffered, living all alone in those dreadful rooms, with nothing to do but to think, think, think! And for six days you have not written to me!"

"I am very sorry, very sorry indeed. I will take care never to neglect you again," he answered, gently. "But, my poor girl, you have been letting your imaginations torment you entirely without necessity. Lis-

ten, now, and I will show you that there really is nothing to fear, and no danger whatsoever of discovery. There was only one source from which I apprehended it. Lady St. Aubyn, I was afraid, might suspect. But she has recognised and acknowledged me. You understand, Emily? She has distinctly recognised me as her brother. And she has been living here for a *month*, under the same roof with me. Yet, I assure you, she has not the faintest—not the remotest suspicion of the truth. That peril, then, is surmounted, and it was the only one that seemed serious. With other members of the family I feared no difficulty, and I have found none. You are listening, Emmy?”

“Yes, dear, yes. I cannot help trembling a little. But it is only physical weakness, an effect of the mental strain. My mind is quite clear again.”

“That is right! But you must never let this occur again; you must not alarm your-

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self with bugbears of the imagination. Look calmly, now, at the circumstances of the case. A young fellow named Romney Northbrooke suddenly disappears, some eighteen years ago, and is believed to be dead. Six years back certain bankers, well acquainted with his paternal relations, receive a communication from the said Romney Northbrooke, stating that he is living in America, and asking for information respecting his wife and family, whom he has left all this time in ignorance of his existence. The communication is accompanied with a transmission of money. The bankers, at his desire, keep their customer's secret, and from time to time receive from him large remittances, until a very considerable fortune has been placed in their hands. They are then warned by Mr. Romney Northbrooke of his intention to return to England. In process of time a gentleman appears who possesses Romney Northbrooke's papers, who writes Romney

Northbrooke's hand, who resembles Romney Northbrooke in features, hair, and complexion, and who claims Romney Northbrooke's children.

“A series of fatalities occurring at the same moment have brought Romney Northbrooke into the position of heir to the family estates and title. The pretensions of the man who has declared himself to be Romney Northbrooke are then carefully investigated, and are established beyond question. He succeeds to the title and property; he is recognised and acknowledged, as I have shown, by the nearest Northbrooke relatives. There is no flaw in the evidence—no suspicion excited anywhere.

“Now, my dear Emily, where lies the danger? What room have you for those foolish fears? There is only one man who can prove that the present baronet, Sir Romney Northbrooke, has no right to the name or title; and that man lies buried in a lonely

wood in California ! Again I ask what room is there for alarm ? ”

“ Oh, Carleton ! I think there *is* room. I see many ways in which danger may arise.”

“ Name them.”

The visitor raised a hand which was small and neatly gloved to her brow, and pressed it there for a few moments before she replied :

“ Oh, it is miserable to think of, or to speak of——. But, Carleton, it is only nine years since you left England. Any day you may meet one who will recollect you.”

“ What ! as Carleton Heathcote ? No, I am not afraid of it ; in these spectacles and with my hair and whiskers of so different a shade. Besides, am I not altered independently of the disguise ? You would not have known me yourself, Emily, if I had not told you who I was.”

“ Ah, yes, you are changed,” admitted Miss Heathcote, with a sigh of mingled re-

lief and distress ; “ but, Carleton, some one who knew you there—in America—might meet you again.”

“ *Who* knew me in America ? A few back-woodsmen in Canada ; a labourer or two on that farm near San Francisco ; a host of Norfolk Isle lags and Australian gaol-birds ; the riff-raff and scum of society at the diggings. Are any of these likely to come across Sir Romney Northbrooke, of Brooke Hall, Derbyshire ? or, if they did, to dare to claim his acquaintance ? No there is not much fear of that ! ”

“ Perhaps not. Oh, I hope not ! But then, again, there are the people who knew *him* both before he went away and afterwards, when he was a broker in San Francisco.”

“ Yes, but recollect that we were noticeably alike—so much so as to be frequently mistaken for brothers.”

“ But he was older than you, was he not ? ”

“He would have been forty-three now, whereas I am only thirty-eight. But what of that? I look the full five years older. Now, Emily, you cannot stay many minutes longer. But I want you to understand thoroughly that there is no occasion for your anxiety about me. The chances are ten to one, *twenty* to one against discovery. You see that, don't you?”

“Yes, yes, I will try to believe it. But, oh, my brother, my poor brother!” she sobbed, rising suddenly and throwing her arms round his neck, “it all seems like a bad dream—a mad miserable dream! I cannot believe it sometimes. It appears so impossible, so utterly incredible that *you* could have done this thing; you who were always so proud, so honourable, so upright! Even now, I cannot help fancying that I must be insane to credit it,” and she cast a curious, uneasy glance round the handsomely-furnished room, with its numerous



book-cases, crowded with well-bound volumes, its costly pictures, its bronze busts and statues glimmering faintly in the corners where shadows hung undispersed by the feeble light of the single moderator-lamp.

"No, it is all real, you see," said her companion, following her eyes and laughing in a bitter, mirthless fashion. You are under no hallucination. Your brother, Carleton Heathcote, has become a scamp, a scoundrel, an adventurer, an impostor."

"But I love you still! Dear, dearest Carleton, I love you still!"

"I am not worth your love, Emmy," he faltered, in a broken voice, stooping to kiss her. "I am a bad fellow. Yet, believe me, what I am going to tell you is true. Up to the moment when I took the papers—the receipts for his banking account and all the proofs of his identity—from poor Northbrooke's dead body (at which moment the temptation first presented itself to per-

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sonate him) I have never done a mean or dishonourable action. I had worked, I had starved, but I had kept myself honest. I was a better man, ten times, than the man I am pretending to be. I would not have stooped to get money as he got it—but, bah! why hark back upon the past—what am I now? When this devilish scheme first flashed upon me like an inspiration it seemed almost right that I should take advantage of the opportunity it opened for avenging myself on the cruelty of fate and the injustice of man. I had been defrauded out of my own fortune, and had suffered horribly in consequence—here was a fortune which I might have for the taking, and without, as I thought, doing any great injury to its rightful owners. I should make as good a father, I believed, as the real Romney, and his children would have all at my death. As for the wife, I intended, of course, to get a divorce, or—but

I have told you already the process of reasoning I went through with myself—I don't know why I am going over it all again. Emily, I sometimes think the game has not been worth the candle. I sometimes wish I could once more be an honest man, even if I had to get my bread by breaking stones upon the highway. But it is too late now——”

“Oh, no! It is not too late!” exclaimed Emily, an eager light coming into her haggard face. “My darling brother, let us go away together to some unknown land. Let us——”

“Let us come to our senses,” he interposed, in a cynical tone, and with a sudden hardening of his expression. “No, my dear, I couldn't resume the *rôle* of an honest fool now if I would, and I wouldn't if I could. Fate or Providence—if there be a Providence—has treated me scurvily ill. I have been turned into a knave by

the force of circumstances, and a knave I will remain to the end. It is a long time since I have been seized with a virtuous fit, or been in the melting mood, as I was just now, and I daresay it will be a long time before I experience such an attack again. It is of no use your thinking to reclaim me, Emmy. Banish that hope from your mind once for all. I tell you, girl, I grow a worse man every day, as is no wonder, surrounded by the maddening difficulties I am in—hating that idiotical, empty-headed boy, as I do, just because I know I am keeping him out of what is his own; and, worse still——. But no matter, Emily, you must go now, you must go at once. What lies am I to invent about your visit? There, can you realise the life of constant deception I am obliged to lead? Ask yourself, then, if any virtuous principle is likely to survive. And I am acting like a brute now in making you so unhappy. Go, my poor

sister, and I will write—I will run down to see you in a few days.”

Miss Heathcote rose, but instead of making any movement to leave the room, she only clung the closer to her brother’s arm.

“I cannot go, Carleton, I *will* not go until you have promised me what I came to ask. I want you to let me come and live here, in this house, as housemaid, kitchenmaid, anything you like. I must be near you, Carleton, so as to see at all hours of the day that you are safe, so as to know directly any danger menaces you. I cannot bear my life else. This terrible secret weighs upon me when I am absent, until I can neither eat nor sleep, until I really fear to lose my senses. When I am with you the dread is less, and if I could only live in the house——”

“A pretty scheme, indeed! Yes, come and live in the house, of course, and call

me Carleton. Awaken suspicion, by all means. Court the very destruction you profess to dread !”

“ It would not be so. Indeed, indeed, Carleton, I should be able to exercise the most perfect control over my speech and action. Ah ! only let me enjoy the evidence of your security, and all that would be easy to me. You would be my master, Sir Romney Northbrooke, and nothing more. It is the very fear that, were I to lose my mind, I might betray you, that fills me with horror, and makes the danger of my really doing so the more imminent. Oh, Carleton, I love you ; I could never betray you by incaution ; I am ready to sacrifice my life, even my conscience for your sake. Think, dear, there are only the two of us, brother and sister, and you are everything to me—everything in the world. Do, do let it be as I say !”

“ My poor Emmy, if I could consent I

would. It was for your sake, in the beginning, as much as for my own, that I resolved upon this thing. But I wish to God, now, that I had never told you of it! It has given you nothing but suffering. You were happier in that wretched, toilsome life of governess than you are now with money and liberty, at the price you have had to pay for them."

"But if I could only live with you, or *near* you," she reiterated, "then I should be easier. Let me live near the lodge gate. Is there not a village where I could lodge close to?"

"No, no. It would be safer to have you in the house, even, than that. Stay! You might come here as companion to my daugh—to Eva. If it were not for the hazard, you should. But were we to be seen together by anyone who had known us both in former days there might be a risk."

"But we would not be seen together,

Carleton," she interrupted, eagerly. "When you had company I should keep carefully in the background. Besides, no one knows me now. For eight years I have dropped out of society—out of the world altogether. I saw no one when I was with aunt, and since she cast me off, I have lived, you know, in Ireland and in Madeira, the quiet secluded life of an unknown dependant. All our relatives are dead. My friends, if I ever had any, have long since forgotten my very existence. *You* might be remembered by college companions—by many people, but no one would recollect *me*. There would be no danger in having me here; but, on the other hand, I should be able to ward off danger; I should watch for it, and warn you. Ha! *do* let it be! I cannot, cannot live away from you, alone with those haunting terrors!"

"I have a good mind to chance it!" he exclaimed; "the risk, after all, would not



be so great. And, Emily, you love me? You would save me from suffering if you could? Yes, I believe it. You shall come, then, and you shall help me to ward off a calamity which would be ten times greater to me than that of having the truth discovered. You shall know a secret that is at once my bliss and agony——. But, for the present, we must part. Now, farewell. Can you get back to Buxton this evening? It is six o'clock."

"Yes, there is a train at 7.50, and I have a coach at the gate-house. Oh, how glad I am I came! I have seen you safe and well. To-night I shall sleep!"

"You are a good sister, Emily. At whatever risk, it shall be as you wish. I will write to-morrow, when I have decided how it is to be managed. Good-bye. Now, you will try to be happy."

Happy! What a mockery the word seemed!


She smiled and nodded her head. But the affirmative gesture was contradicted by the look in her eyes as they met his for one long, lingering moment ere she lowered her veil.

That look said plainly that for Emily Heathcote happiness in this life was over for ever.

Since the world began have not the innocent always suffered through the guilty?

## CHAPTER XVI.

MISS NORTHBROOKE'S COMPANION.

OW do you spell recovery, 'Eva,  
Two C's, I suppose?"

"No, dear, only one."

"Well, there are two *V's*, then?"

"Certainly not. My dear Alec, why don't you look in the dictionary, when you have one close at your elbow?"

"Oh, confound the dictionary! It takes me ten minutes to find a word. I came here to write on purpose that I might ask you if I happened to come across anything I didn't know."

As he had already required instruction as to the orthography of every third word in the single page of note-paper he had

filled, it appeared to his sister that he "came across" a good deal that he didn't know, and she was beginning to feel considerable impatience at having certain reflections she was indulging constantly broken in upon by the tiresome reiteration of—How do you spell this? how do you spell the other? Aware, however, that poor Alec was having a very *mauvais quart d'heure*, as, bending over his desk in a constrained attitude, he laboriously scrawled those crooked lines, she swallowed her irritation as best she could, and continued amiably to lend him her assistance.

The letter, as may be guessed, was to Lady Helena St. Aubyn. The lovers had agreed at parting to exchange correspondence once a week, and this was Alec's second epistle to his *fiancée* which he was now going through the torture of inditing. He had brought his writing materials to the room which Eva was occupying—the

same room wherein, just twelve days ago, she had spent that miserable afternoon in Lady Helena's company. But how different on this occasion were her sentiments from what they had been on that! On the day in question she had first learned that Clive Willoughby's life was in jeopardy. On this she had received the joyful assurance that all danger was over, and that his entire recovery might confidently be looked for.

Very dreadful, howbeit, had been that long and anxious interval, whilst day by day the shadows had gathered and deepened around, until they had lain like a horror of great darkness over her path. For it was only from the very brink of the grave that Clive's life had been given back; only after it had hung for weary hours and days in a balance which it had seemed that a feather's weight might turn. Needless to describe her sufferings during this time. Few people who have lived out anything

like the allotted span of human existence but can look back upon similar crises in their own history—periods when the whole heavens and earth were enshrouded in gloom—when life seemed to have come to a standstill, as the leaden moments dragged themselves away, weighted with the dull hopelessness of despair or the keener anguish of suspense. Such experiences are common enough; but it is not very often that a sudden reversal of the picture takes place. As a rule, the eye must grow accustomed to the gloom, and only learn by degrees that all the beauty and sweetness of life have not departed. The back must accommodate itself to the burden—to find, first, that it is not intolerable; then, that it grows lighter and lighter with the disintegrating effects of time. With Eva Northbrooke, however, it had happened, as it sometimes does, that the sun had all at once broken through the clouds, dispersing

the darkness by a radiancy that, by contrast, was almost overpowering ; that the weight of misery had been lifted unexpectedly, and at the very moment when it had become most crushing.

After nine days of burning fever and fierce delirium had run their wasting course, reducing his strength to a minimum, poor Clive had lain, as it were, in the torpor of death. Each moment had been expected to be his last. Eva herself had seen him, and had bidden him a sad and silent farewell. His eyes had turned upon her, glazed, as she believed, with the film of death. She had seen him suddenly brighten with recognition ; she had felt the cold fingers she had taken close feebly over her own ; then, unable to bear more, she had pressed her lips to his forehead, and had hurried from the room, assured that she should see him no more in life. But, strange to say, from the moment of that

visit Clive had rallied—rallied in the most marvellous and rapid manner ! And this morning both the physicians in attendance upon him had declared that their patient had over-ridden his peril, and that, in all human probability, his recovery was assured !

For the first time since the accident at the lake Eva had to-day tried her harp and exercised her voice. For the first time since she had known of her lover's peril she had been able to turn her mind to other thoughts than the one absorbing anxiety as to the issue of his illness. Throughout those twelve weary days she had been like a person walking in sleep. The apathy of wretchedness had made her indifferent to all that was passing around her save as it concerned the all-engrossing question. But now, everything was changed. Peace had come after the storm ; the light of renewed hope and happiness flooded her soul ; her



interest in life had revived. She recollected (with astonishment to think of how little moment the fact had hitherto appeared to her) that on this day a new inmate was to be added to the house.

Her father had suggested—she could scarcely remember when or how—that she should have a companion and chaperon. He had urged that propriety demanded it on account of her youth; and he had represented how, in various ways, it would be convenient and pleasant for her to have a lady friend always at hand. Surprised at his wishing it, but giving scarcely a thought to the matter, Eva had yielded an unconcerned acquiescence; and Sir Romney (as, despite the revelations of the preceding chapter, we shall continue to call him) had then set about the task of finding a suitable person. He had advertised in the papers, and he had consulted his daughter as to the answers he had received. He had read

to her, also, certain recommendatory notes which he had had from former employers respecting two ladies whom he had selected as the most promising among the candidates, and Eva was under the impression that *her* verdict, given with careless reluctance, had settled the rival claims of the two.

"I wonder what Miss Heathcote will be like, Alec," she remarked, by and bye, when for some little time the pen had been slowly scratching away without interruption.

"Don't know, I'm sure. But how do you spell the name? I was just writing about her."

Eva gave the desired information. "She will be here in an hour, Alec," she added.

"Will she? Just wait a minute; I shall have finished directly. I must put a capital T for Towers, mustn't I? The Towers, you know? And two f's in affec-

tionate. There, that's a relief! By Jove! I do hate writing letters! This spelling is such a confounded nuisance," he went on, rubbing the ink from his fingers with a piece of blotting-paper as he approached the fireplace. "Upon my word, you know, it's too bad that I should never have had any education to speak of! A fellow feels it at times."

"But, my dear Alec, you might have have been taking lessons all this time, you know," said his sister. "You might do so still, if you chose."

"Lessons! Bah! Fancy a man of my age learning lessons! A man who is engaged to be married! Ridiculous!" Alec pulled indignantly at his dawning moustache as he spoke, looking much more like a petulant boy the while than the "man" he boasted himself.

Then, dropping into a chair, he carefully fitted in his eyeglass to study the time-

piece ; and, restored by that occupation to dignity and good humour, resumed—

“I’m afraid that companion of yours will be rather a bore sometimes, Eva, won’t she? For my part, I can’t make out what you wanted with her at all ; but, as the governor says, you and he have settled the matter between you, and I suppose I had no right to interfere. It seems a queer idea, though, and just about the last thing I should have thought he would have liked. But, of course, he is always ready to do anything you wish.”

“I don’t think I have wished this, Alec. Indeed, to tell the truth, I have never properly realised until to-day that the lady was coming.”

“By Jove, neither have I !” rejoined her brother ; “I have been so taken up with thinking about that poor, dear fellow. You have no idea, Eva, what a load has been lifted off my breast. By Jove, if he

had died, I don't suppose I should ever have got over it; upon my word, I don't! But I believe you are almost as pleased yourself as I am," he went on. "You have been going about the house like a ghost lately, but to-day you look quite a different girl."

Eva stooped to poke the fire and hide her glowing face. "Yes," she said, breaking into a silvery little laugh, "I am certainly pleased."

"And very natural, too," commented Alec. "But, by Jove, I can't make the governor out! Have you noticed how cross he is to-day? *He* doesn't seem particularly relieved. In fact, when I told him the good news this morning, he looked so confoundedly queer that"—Alec lowered his voice and finished the sentence with some hesitancy—"that I could almost have fancied, do you know, that he had actually wanted the poor fellow to die!"

"Alec! how wicked of you to say such a

thing! How could you *possibly* have thought it? Oh, Alec!"

"Well, of course, that is all nonsense. Pray don't look so horrified, my dear girl. I know very well that it couldn't be so. Yet, upon my word, he *did* look strange. But then, he always is strange. The queerest man, by Jove! or, at any rate, the queerest father, I ever knew. I must say, though, that he has behaved a good deal more agreeably to me of late. He begins to see, I suppose—hem!"

The remark was interrupted by the entrance of the person to whom it was referred. Alec rose and offered his chair by the fire, politely observing that it was a cold day. But Sir Romney waved aside his courtesy with ill-concealed impatience. "Thanks, my good fellow, don't disturb yourself," he said, drawing forward another chair.

"Papa, I am glad you have come in,"

observed Eva, "Miss Heathcote will be here in half an hour, and I wanted you to be present to receive her."

"Did you, little one? But you know I don't like strangers," he answered, regarding her with a tender smile and a slight rise of colour, which melted somewhat his stern, cold features; but which speedily died out again, leaving them immobile and passionless as ever. Passionless? Ah! if Eva could have seen the believing expression of those dark eyes which still dwelt on her face through the obscuring green spectacles! For more reasons than one, it was well that Sir Romney Northbrooke should adhere so closely as he did to the use of his "preservers!"

"I think, father, I'll just run down to the Vicarage again before dinner," said Alec. "There will be plenty of time."

"But no necessity," returned the Baronet, curtly. "I have just come from there."

“Oh! have you, sir? And how is he now?”

“Our hero still progresses. There is no doubt that he will live to enjoy the glory of having saved your valuable life. By the way, how high would you rate the said valuable life? I have just been offering £5,000 for it.”

“I don't understand you, sir?”

“No? Allow me to explain. You are aware, perhaps, that your gallant rescuer is a pauper—I mean, that he is not endowed, as he ought to be, with this world's goods. Very well. You are also acquainted, no doubt, with the fact that he is reading for the bar, and that he has for some time been anxious to go up to London and be entered at one of the Inns of Court? Well, feeling that we owed him every assistance in our power to forward his success in life, I went down, this afternoon, and offered the



Vicar, on his behalf, the sum I have named, in order that directly he recovers he may be in a position to repair to London and commence his studies there."

"By Jove, it was very good of you, father? I hope he will take it. But, of course, he will," protested Alec.

"His uncle thinks he will *not* accept my offer," said Sir Romney.

"I am *sure* he will not accept it," asserted Eva, her face flushing violently.

"Why not, my child?" asked her father.

"Why not?" she repeated. "Oh, papa! did he do what he did to be *paid* for it? *Could* we pay him?"

"What did he do it for?" he demanded, with peculiar emphasis.

"Good gracious, sir, what a question!" broke in Alec; "as though he could have any other object than the one!"

"Of saving your life, eh? No, I have no doubt, my boy, that that was his

object. But what do you think was the motive spring of his desire to effect that object? Ha, I see the inquiry is too abstruse for your apprehension. No matter, don't trouble yourself about it. You would not object, then, to my giving him the £5,000?"

"I should be glad to give him ten times as much, if I had it of my own, and if he would only take it," affirmed the young man, eagerly. "By Jove, I wish he would! It would make a fellow feel more comfortable."

"Just so. Your nice perceptions, I see, have discerned the situation. But I wish still more devoutly, that you had not contrived to lay yourself and your family under this incubus of obligation! It is very distressing."

"Miss Heathcote," announced the butler, showing in a lady. Eva rose. Her father's last words had affected her

painfully. She was sensible of a curious constriction about the heart—a vague feeling of alarm; but she had no time now to analyze the cause of these sensations. Summoning up a smile of welcome, she advanced to meet the stranger. Miss Heathcote was attired in black, the materials of her dress being good and the make simple. In figure she was small and slender. Her complexion was fair—indeed, pale—her hair light, her features refined. Her eyes, however, were dark and very beautiful. They had a sad, wistful expression in them, Eva thought, and there were lines about the face which indicated suffering. Miss Heathcote's age, as she had already informed her employers, was thirty; but she scarcely looked so old as that. Her manner of returning Miss Northbrooke's greeting was self-possessed, her voice low and sweet. That her new companion had every right to

the title of "lady," Eva at once decided. She also felt, even in this first moment, pleasantly attracted to her. Before the close of the evening that attraction had greatly increased; and, for an hour or two, as she lay awake that night before sleep visited her pillow, Miss Heathcote occupied a considerable share of her thoughts, even despite the deeper interests which centred round the recovery of her lover.

What, however, would Evelyn Northbrooke have thought of her companion had she known how she was passing those hours which were proving so sleepless to herself? Had she known that instead of being buried in slumber in the chamber wherein she had bidden her good night, Miss Heathcote was closeted with her father in one of the ancient and unfrequented rooms of the house, whither the baronet had led her in order to ensure the safety and privacy of their interview!

And what would she have thought—how would she have felt—could she have been present at that interview! It is well for us sometimes, that we cannot know the tragedies or the comedies that get themselves played out beneath our very roofs—within sight of our blinded eyes and hearing of our unconscious ears!









